APRILLY

JANE D. ABBOTT

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By

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April, child of the circus, upon the death of her mother, finds herself at the mercy of a none too tender boarding - house keeper. Desperate, she runs away and follows "Mr.-Nice-face" to the quiet little town of Blossom.

Taken in as companion to the stern but warm-hearted old Miss Deborah, April finds much happiness and makes many friends; among them the famous and charming authoress Leila Lightwood and that same Mr. Nice-face she had followed to her new home. But through it all April longs for her beloved friend of the circus, Toto and when she finally finds him he brings her a great and pleasant surprise. And April finds romance as well as friendship in the town she learns to call "home".

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APRILLY

Mary Lou Pratt

APRILLY

BY

JANE ABBOTT

AUTHOR OF

'HAPPY HOUSE, KEINETH,
LARKSPUR, ETC.

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TO

ALL THE APRIL-GIRLS IN THIS WORLD

I DEDICATE THIS STORY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	On the Way to Blossom	11
II.	Toto's Sacrifice	19
III.	Poor Queenie	29
IV.	The Hired Girl	41
V.	Deborah Decides	54
VI.	April Meets the Merediths	66
VII.	Mr. Nice-Face	78
VIII.	Leila Lightwood	90
IX.	Sackcloth	101
X.	Gullfaxi	111
XI.	The Fair	122
XII.	Paying the Piper	128
XIII.	Windover	139
XIV.	At the Sugar Bowl	152
XV.	Ghosts and Apple Blossoms	162
XVI.	Changes	173
XVII.	The Accident	183
XVIII.	Rose Goes to New York	197
XIX.	Inn-You-Go	205
XX.	Poor Keith	214
XXI.	The Stranger	221
XXII.	Justice	228
XXIII.	Toto	234
XXIV.	At the Rectory	241
XXV.	April's Storm	249
XXVI.	Rosemary	256
XXVII.	Out of the Ring	263
XXVIII.	At Windover Point	268
XXIX.	April's Sunshine	274

APRILLY

CHAPTER I

On the Way to Blossom

Year in and year out the Boston-Portland local pulled out of the Boston terminal at thirty minutes past four. At twenty-five minutes past four, on an afternoon in early June, a tall young man elbowed his way to one of the little windows of the ticket office.

"Blossom, please. How much?"

"Return?"

"N-no."

"Two dollars and seventy cents."

The young man passed the money through the window, snatched the small ticket and moved away.

Behind him stood a young girl. Many girls stepped to the little window and purchased tickets but in this girl there was something so unusual that, for a moment, the ticket agent stared. A floppy-brimmed cerise hat, banded by huge poppies, shadowed her thin face, a faded green silk coat hung loosely on the slender figure—yet is was not these

bizarre garments that held the man's attention, it was the frightened defiance burning in the big eyes and written on the tightly compressed lips.

She edged closer to the window. "I want a ticket," in a small voice.

"Whereto, miss?"

"Oh-h, I want that—that two-dollar-and-seventy-cent ticket." She spoke breathlessly, giving a hurried glance over her shoulder. "Hurry, please."

"Where y'going?" The ticket agent scowled. He had no time for "nonsense."

"Where-where that man's going. I mean—that place!" She could not, of course, tell this cross-looking man, glowering at her through the iron grating of the window, that she didn't care *where* she went so long as she went away from Boston; that, because she happened to have exactly two dollars and eighty cents she might as well buy the two-dollar-and-seventy-cent ticket. "Blossom or-or something," she finished, falteringly.

"Blossom, Maine. Better be sure where you want to go next time or stay home." The man flung the ticket across to the girl and gathered up the money she emptied from a beaded purse

"Oh, I wonder if I've lost him," thought the girl as she moved away from the window. Her eyes swept the crowd anxiously. There he was—the tall, broad shouldered young man. He had stopped to

buy a newspaper. Gripping her bulging bag in both hands the girl fled toward him.

It was not because he was good looking that she had followed him for four blocks, almost running to keep up with his giant stride; it was because he carried a suitcase and, therefore, must be—she had reasoned—headed for a railroad station. She would have followed him if he had been decrepit and hoary. Now it gave her confidence, to know that they were both going to Blossom—wherever that was. She could stand at his elbow and do exactly what he did.

So close behind him she nudged her way through the pressing crowd; she showed her ticket to the man at the gate just as he had done, and at his very heels went through the brass-railed passage and up and down a flight of stairs.

"Blossom?" the young man asked the conductor who stood outside of the car.

"Yessir."

"Blossom?" asked the girl.

"Yes'm." The conductor smiled, took the bulging grip and swung it up to the platform.

The young man sat down on one of the red plush seats, laid his straw hat beside him, unfolded the newspaper and fell to reading it, utterly unconscious that there was a young lady traveling with him!

The girl sat down directly behind him, snuggled

her big bag at her feet and drew a long, quivery breath, as though it was the first she had dared to draw for sometime.

"A-a-al a-a-boo-rrd!" sang the conductor outside. With a grinding and a creaking and a hissing the train moved slowly forward through the murky trainshed, then out into the afternoon sunlight. Faster and faster the brick walls shot past the car window. In an ecstasy of relief the girl dropped back against the car seat. Whatever lay before her in Blossom, wherever that was, Boston—and Fleming Street—would very soon be behind her!

Yet that thought must have carried with it some desolation, for the moment's glow of excitement suddenly gave way to a frightened look and a threat of tears.

"But I'd rather go *anywhere!* I hope I never, never, never see you again!" the girl apostrophized the flying buildings. "Blossom can't be so very bad or you wouldn't be going there, Mr. Nice-face. I'll pretend I'm your daughter—or—or your—sister—something that belongs to you. You want to read your newspaper so I'll sit back and be very quiet." Thus she struggled to rally her faltering spirit.

After a few moments she grew aware of a group of young people directly across the car from her. One, especially, a young girl of her own age, caught and held her attention. She was very pretty. She

laughed a great deal and her eyes sparkled when she laughed. She wore a blue silk turban set jauntily atop of trimly coiled red hair. All animation, she was talking with the girl who shared her seat and the boy who sat in front of her. Their chatter was noisy and punctuated by bursts of laughter, as though their hearts were very light. It was of school, mostly, and school-mates—"Sniffy" and "Dodie" and "Bobs" and "Cub." They had coats and furs and innumerable boxes and bags piled about them; the girls held ukelele cases and the boy had a banjo case and gold clubs. He called the girls "Chris" and "Rose" and they called him "Keith."

"Poor old dad was awfully cut up to send us off up here! I made a dreadfully unpleasant row, I guess. But I did want to go to Minniwanka. I shan't mind it so much, though, with you up there, Rose. Forest Hill is awfully old and pretty even if it is as dull as a graveyard."

"Dull nothing!" the boy broke in. "There's fun enough. Trouble with you, Chris, 'sthat you don't think there's anything but dancing There's tennis and golf up the coast at Old Point and sailing and fishing and the lighthouse. Old Cap'n Merry, who used to be the lighthouse keeper knows the most yarns. And the farm—"

"Keith likes such stupid things," Chrissy retorted. "Just wait until you see Blossom!"

The girl across the car sat suddenly alert. These young people were going to Blossom, too—what a pretty name, her favorite name! And she liked the name Keith; the boy was freckled and jolly and he had spoken of such interesting things—the lighthouse and its keeper and the fishing people. Chrissy was not as pretty as Rose but she had a lively manner and a facinating voice.

"Swells," the girl called them, mentally. She wondered where they were going in Blossom, why they were going, to whom they belonged. Thinking all these things about these interesting young people kept from her mind the dreadful question which she must face but would not face until the very last moment—where was *she* going when she reached Blossom?

Presently the girl Chrissy, glancing across the car, spied the cerise hat. She managed, by a nod of her head and a twinkle in her eye, to draw Rose's attention to it, also.

But Rose smiled, a kind little smile.

"Traveling alone?"

"I—I'm going to—Blossom."

Immediately the three were interested.

"Oh, are you? Do you live there?" Chrissy asked.

"N—no. That is, not—exactly."

"I'm sure I would have known it," Miss Chrissy

laughed. "There can't be more than one hundred people in the whole town and they all go to the post-office every evening. And I've never seen you."

"We haven't been there for two years and Blossom has eight hundred inhabitants," retorted Keith.

"Counting the chickens and the pigs and cows and old Simon Tewksbury twice who's crazy and thinks he's somebody else!"

"Will you have some candy?" asked Rose, passing a box of bonbons.

The girl took a piece of the candy, eating it with relish for she was very hungry. The others went on talking, apparently forgetting her existence; she was left alone with the pleasant speculations which made her forget unpleasant realities. The nice-faced man had tossed aside his paper and was reading a magazine he had taken from his grip.

After a long while the brakeman shouted through the car that Blossom was the next stop. Among the young people there was an excited and hurried gathering up of wraps and bags. The tall young man put his magazine back in his suitcase and his hat on his head. To conceal her own sudden agitation the girl leaned quickly over her bag.

The boy Keith hesitated a moment in the aisle. "May I carry your grip?" he asked pleasantly, though he was already laden down with luggage.

"Oh, no—I—thanks," and the girl hung back

that they might all, even Mr. Nice-face, pass on down the aisle ahead of her.

"Isn't she the rarest thing in those clothes?" came back Chrissy's whisper.

Four of Keith's eight hundred inhabitants—five, counting the telegraph operator—were on the platform of the little station at Blossom. One, a man with a shiny cap and leggins, stepped up to Keith and touched his forehead in salutation.

"Oh, hullo, Riggs," was Keith's only response as he unceremoniously dumped his burden into the man's arms.

Two of the four approached Mr. Nice-face. The fourth stared up and down the length of the platform, down the track after the rapidly disappearing train, and then at the girl, standing forlornly by the side of her old bag.

"Be ye the gal Miss Debory Manny's 'specting from her advertisn'? If ye be I'm Jeremy Waite and Miss Debory asked me to pick you up. That's my hoss and buggy over yan and I'll git ye to Manny's in the shake of a lamb's tail. Jest hand me thet thar bag, missy, if ye be."

The girl caught her breath and the color flooded her pale cheeks. She had never heard of Miss Debory Manny—but she must go *somewhere!*

"I—I—am."

CHAPTER II

Toto's Sacrifice

On an evening, ten years before the spring afternoon when a young girl challenged Fate with a two-dollar-and-seventy-cent railroad ticket, two persons, a man and a woman, in a stuffy hotel room, faced one another through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

That it was the woman's room was evident from the garments thrown carelessly here and there, from the open trunks over which hung more clothes, from the bureau where photographs, letters, brushes, bottles and jars were scattered in indifferent confusion, topped by a gold-yellow wig. Indeed, the wig had been thrown there only a moment before and the woman was running the fingers of one hand through the thin strands of drab colored hair which really grew on her head while with the other she stifled a wide yawn.

"Toto, what's the matter with you? You were rotten to-night—anyone could tell. You only got half a laugh from the crowd—you oughter gotten more. I knew—I was watching. What's on your mind, Toto? Tell Queenie! You ain't the same. Is it Rosemary that's worrying you, maybe?"

The man who, to thousands, from coast to coast,

was Toto, the Prince of Clowns and to a few, so very few that it had been forgotten, was Alfred Meredith, rose from his chair and paced the room with quick steps. He was small and straight and lithe and well-built, with a wrinkled, reddish face, a big, humorous mouth like a jolly boy's, and narrow, twinkly eyes. The eyes were not twinkling much now though, they were sombre.

The woman regarded him with the proud fondness a mother might show for a big boy. "If it's Rosemary, I tell you, Toto, she's all right. I saw her a week ago Monday and she was as bloomin' as the posy itself. And as cute as could be—the two o' them! Like little twin flowers growin' in a garden. And she's as like your Kitty as two peas. It made the tears come to my eyes to look at her and to think—" The woman stopped abruptly; her words were not having the comforting effect upon her companion for which she sought. He had stopped in his pacing and had groaned.

"Kitty! Kitty! I believe, Queenie, that half of me's buried with her. I can't forget her! I can't—O God—" He covered his face.

"There, there, Toto, don't let it get you like that. She was the sweetest, best—" Tears ran down over the woman's painted cheeks. "But she wouldn't want you to say that—not *her!* Buck up, Toto. You got Rosemary. And I've been to her just what

I am to my own kid—for didn't I love Kitty better'n anyone on earth I ever knew? I haven't forgotten how good she was to Queenie when my precious better half skipped off—with her tender, lovin' ways!"

"*Don't!*" cried the man angrily. "I can't endure it." Then his tone softened. "I'm a brute to talk to you like that, after all you've done for me—and the baby. Queenie, you say she's well—she's happy—and—cute—and—and looks like—Kitty?"

"Why, yes. But ain't you going down? Why, I thought, with the show coming here we'd both run down. I wrote to Mrs. Houck and told her we would and to have Rosemary fixed up pretty."

The man was staring in a queer way; he had scarcely heard what she said.

"Queenie, has she—red hair? Like Kitty's?"

"The cutest, softest little red curls like Kitty's used to be in her neck. Don't you remember—on hot days? I can see her now waiting in the dressing room for you, all smilin' and cool when the rest of us were hot and tired—"

"Queenie, she was too good to be a clown's wife. Just a clown—"

"Now don't you say that, Toto. I've lived in the ring since I was big enough to stand on my toes and I've known good men and bad men and there's as many outside of the ring as inside! Look at the

man I married—thought I was doin' well, didn't I, marryin' out of the ring? Kitty was the sweetest little flower I ever knew but she wasn't a bit better a woman than you are a man, Alfred Meredith. And ain't you college bred? A swell? She flung the words at him defiantly.

"It doesn't matter much what I *was*, Queenie. I'm a clown now."

"And the best clown all over the world! I guess there's many a bank president would just as soon draw down the salary Toto gets. Give me another cigarette, Toto. Queenie has to swear off when she's 'round those precious kids but not now. Say Toto, didn't you close up a pretty good contract with Bushman to go with the show to 'Frisco? 'Sthat what's put you in the dumps?"

"Queenie—" the man spoke slowly, "you're the best friend I've had—"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Toto, the great clown and me—just La Belle Queen!"

"Queenie, Kitty knew your real worth. You said you had known good men and good women in the ring. Well, so have we—I mean, so have I. Didn't I go to you first, four years ago, when Kitty died? You were the only one I'd trust Kitty's baby with. You had your own to take care of so I knew you'd make room in your heart for my poor wee one."

"The cunnin' little kid, I couldn't love her more if she was my own—if my baby'd been twins!"

"Queenie, I want you to help me now."

"I'd do anything for you, Toto—for Kitty's sake."

"This is for the baby's."

"What is it, Toto? You act queer!"

"Oh, I've had this in mind for some time. You see, Queenie, I haven't always been a clown—"

"I know—you wasn't born in the ring like me!"

"My father wanted me to go into the business with him—selling ship's supplies! Can you see me at it? But I got to going on in amateur things, during vacations, and in college stunts. It had a fascination for me that I couldn't shake. I used to feel the crowd, especially the kids, and it—went to my head—like wine. The time came when my father said I'd got to cut it out, that I disgraced him and wasted my time. We had words over it—hasty words I've wished since I hadn't said. And I swore I wouldn't go into his business. I went away, out West, and, to show him, I signed up with a small circus under this name I've used ever since—Toto Conge. He died not long after that—and disinherited me. I didn't care about the money but I hated the feeling that my family—what was left of it—looked down upon me. I've always hated that, even when I was most successful, even when Kitty said she'd love

me. But I guess Toto'll always be Toto. I can't change now. I quit once, you know, but I got a hundred letters from kids all over and they came just when I was blue and life without Kitty didn't seem worth living. I went back. This clown business is all right for me, Queenie—but it's not—for Rosemary."

"What d'you mean"? the woman asked sharply.

"I mean—I don't want my girl—Kitty's girl—to grow up—the daughter of a clown!"

"I guess she can be pretty proud of Toto!"

"Queenie, that's all right—from you. But you know and I know how the world will think of her. Toto's daughter! There'll be nothing but the ring—"

Suddenly Queenie's face dropped into her arms. A sob shook her shoulders.

"Toto, *don't* you say that! Don't *I* know? Wasn't that what I hitched up to that miserable Stanton Dangerfield for—to get away from the ring and have a kid like other women? And yet my baby's just like you said—Queenie's daughter; there'll be nothing but the ring for her! But I've never let myself say it. And now you come along and—"

"Queenie, don't. I hadn't thought—of your little girl. I didn't know you cared. Have you—any relatives?"

Queenie drew her hand, in an ashamed way,

across her face. "I'm a fool to blubber like this. No, I never had a relation that wasn't with a show. I haven't any business to be wanting anything better for my little kid. Rosemary's different. *You've* got people. What's the plan, Toto?" She spoke with a grim control in her voice.

"I'm going to give Rosemary up. I'm going to see my brother in New York. I shall settle some money—a lot of money—in trust with him for her. I'll put her in a small school I've been looking up down near Tarrytown where I know they'll be good to her, just as good as—you—and Mrs. Houck. And he can tell anyone who has to know that she's his—dead brother's child. He'll do it—I know he will, for I will make it worth his while."

Queenie stared at him. "Send Rosemary away? Never see her again? My God, Toto—"

"Hush, she's my child! I can do it—for her sake!"

"And won't you *see* her again? You haven't seen her for two years!"

"N—no, I—can't. I can't bear to. I'll write you what to do when I have seen my brother. Queenie, don't look at me like that—as though I were a murderer. If I'm killing anything it's the rest of me that didn't die with Kitty. But my Rosemary shall never know her father was a clown."

Queenie's voice grew sullen. "It's in her blood, Toto! She'll come back—"

"I tell you *no,* Queenie! As the twig is bent—that's the way my little girl shall grow. She will never know the ring."

"Your baby—Kitty's baby—"

"Be *still,* will you? I tell you it's *my* business! I'm doing it because she *is* Kitty's child. I'm going to see my brother to-morrow. Queenie, swear to me now that you'll keep my secret!"

Queenie was frightened. She had never seen Toto like this. She shivered. "I won't tell," she answered.

Had *she* nothing to say—she, who had mothered the motherless babe as though it were her own?

"I'll write you from down there what to do, Queenie. Only—I can't see her. And afterwards I'll help you and your kid as though she were mine—money, I mean, and education. Don't forget how crazy Kitty was over that baby of yours!"

"She has red hair sort of like Kitty's, too," mumbled Queenie, trying to act as though she was not torn inwardly.

Toto, rising suddenly, stood over her; small though he was he gave the impression of bigness and strength.

"God bless you, Queenie, for being such a good friend."

* * * * *

Two days later the letter came to Queenie from New York. It came just as she was starting off to spend the week-end at the little farm where her own and Toto's baby—like twin flowers in a garden—were sheltered.

"* * * On Saturday afternoon a woman from the school will stop for Rosemary. She will take the child by automobile to the school. You need not send any clothes with her. Everything will be furnished there. I found my brother most amenable to my suggestions. From now on I am only Toto Conge, the Clown. Rosemary's father was lost at sea somewhere between Sumatra and Singapore. I've kept one little link. My brother, or any other guardian he may appoint in the event of his death, must send, twice a year, a report to my lawyer in San Francisco of just what Rosemary has been doing, her health, and how much money has been spent on her. We will read those reports together, Queenie * * *"

It was a two hour ride to the village near which the children lived. All the way Queenie sat rigid, staring, drawing mental pictures of Rosemary's future. *She* need not send any clothes—nice, soft things would be given Rosemary; she would be tended and taught and cherished; she would ride in an automobile, maybe have a pony and later a smart horse with a groom; she'd travel everywhere and

she'd meet the finest and richest ladies and gentlemen in the land! She'd never see a circus, or, if she did, she'd sit with the swells and laugh at Toto, maybe—

Kitty's child! Little Kitty had been a teacher in a lonely country school. When Queenie had first met her Queenie had laughed at her simplicity and her prudish notions. But she had grown to love her because Kitty had seen the worth of Toto and to Queenie Toto was the finest thing God had ever made. Then Kitty had helped her through those eventful seven months with the "better-half," whom she had chosen "out of the ring"; Kitty had stayed with her in the lonely hospital when her baby had come; Kitty had named the baby "April" and had been the baby's godmother.

So Kitty's child would never know the ring; *her's* —her arms twitched suddenly in a way they had of doing when she longed to hold her own baby. Poor Queenie, the daring bareback rider was all mother, too! Her little April would grow a few years older and then—Queenie recalled that *she* had been exactly eight years old when she had gone into the ring. But Rosemary—" a report—twice a year. * * * We'll read those reports together, Queenie."

CHAPTER III

Poor Queenie

La Belle Queen's little daughter April made her one appearance in the ring when she was seven and a half years old—to be sure, without La Belle Queen's consent or knowledge! Indeed, the poor mother stormed and wept in a way that astounded the entire company. For three days Claribel, half-maid and half-nurse (and a party to the conspiracy which had resulted in April's triumphal and pretty performance on a coal-black pony), had not dared go near her mistress, and Marky, the head groom who had, at unobserved moments, trained April, kept at a prudent distance.

"And she was just *natural* on it, the pretty little thing," wailed Claribel to a sympathetic audience.

"In her blood, it is," avowed Romeyn, the juggler. "She's goin' to be a buster, *she* is! Queenie'd be on easy street when the kid's a little older, if she only knew it. Queer, *I* say! Queenie's a queen, all righto, anyone with Bushman's 'll say that, but wait—"

Since that day when, directly after Toto's Rosemary had gone away, Queenie had brought little April back with her from the shelter of Mrs. Houck's

country home, her greatest task had been to protect the child from the devotion of the entire circus company. No prinecss born to the purple had more devoted subjects! And as April grew older, in spite of Queenie's guarded watchfulness, each endeavored to develope in the child an aptitude for his or her art, each dreamed for her a wonderful triumph in the ring. But: "April's never, never goin' into the ring" had always been the mother's unvarying protest when April's admirerers persistently pressed her. Only Toto, of them all, had understood, Toto, who went about out of the ring with a queer dead look in the eyes and a hard twist on the lips which were worth millions; Toto, always remembering that moment when Queenie had spoken her one longing, stood between Queenie and the disgusted company; only Toto, of them all, had understood why Queenie had stubbornly refused when, after Claribel and Marky's ill-timed conspiracy, the manager had offered to train the "kid," reserving in return the privilege of putting her on in some of the afternoon performances.

And as the years went on Toto had solved the problem of April's education, too. Warned by Claribel's treachery Queenie had engaged a governess who traveled with the company, but little Miss April had hated the young woman and had rejoiced loudly when she had eloped with the lion trainer. Queenie had for awhile, considered a convent school but such

a howl of protest rose from the indignant company that she had to abandon the plan. Then it was that Toto had purchased a geography—a pretty one with colored pictures and maps—an arithmetic book, a French primer, and a fat volume called English Grammer and declared that he would teach April himself. Though April hated the books she adored her teacher and it was easy to "learn things" when she was sitting on Toto's knee, fingering the slender watch chain and the little flat locket which contained a lady's sweet face. And when the lessons went quickly and she was very good, Queenie had let her play with Sanky, the trapeze artist, and Marietta, the dancer, and Philomena Snow, the fat lady in the side show who told wonderful stories and laughed so hard at times that her great shoulders shook like a giant's! And Claribel, restored to favor, was permitted to take her for long walks through the streets of the stange cities which they toured.

Surely April Dangerfield was as happy, then, as any little girl who lived "out of the ring." And as pretty, too. Queenie knew that—so did the manager who approached Queenie at intervals and renewed his offer of a "little training." At one of these times he had hinted in an unpleasant way, that La Belle Queen was "falling off" and that "she'd do well to look out for herself," which, of course, only made poor Queenie more stubborn than ever!

The autumn of April's fourteenth year Queenie caught a bad cold which she could not throw off, though she appeared in the ring everyday. She kept telling herself, and the anxious Claribel, that she'd be better the next day—or the next. But she was not. So, inevitably, the time came when her performance was so bad that the manager told her bluntly that he could not renew her contract. He asked again for April and again Queenie refused.

The parting had come in Boston—stormy and mutinous on the part of the company (because of the loss of April), Queenie assuming an indifference she did not feel. Toto, terribly distressed, had no choice but to go on with the show, though he begged Queenie to let him know if at any time she needed his help. Queenie promised, defiantly hinted something about a "chance at a contract" with the Manly outfit, and forced a smile until the end. April, bewildered, heartbroken, declared to each that she would never, never forget them and that when she was grown up she would join them again if it was only to take care of Marietta's twinkling toes!

For a few weeks Queenie and April and Claribel lived in a big hotel, the noise and bustle of which April found immediately comforting. *She* did not worry because there was no contract. Then they moved into a small apartment; Claribel cooked in a tiny cubbyhole that was called a kitchenette and

April went to a public school. She hated the lessons and the teachers who were not one bit like Toto but she liked the companionship of her schoolmates—something she had never known before.

But again they moved into "rooms" and April dropped her school. Claribel left them—a parting marked by more tears than had been shed by the entire circus company. And from the "rooms" they moved again to No. 80 Fleming Street and April, with a distress the greater because of her helplessness, began to vaguely sense the truth; Queenie was very, very ill, there would never *be* another contract; she would never ride again. And Toto was very far away in the West. And she hated Fleming Street and its smells and, worse, the grim-faced slatternly Mrs. Slavosky who let the rooms at No. 80 to lodgers.

"Queenie, we won't have to stay here long?" April would beg again and again. And poor Queenie, who had not the courage to speak the truth because telling it would seem like the end, itself, would answer: "Of course we won't! I'll get a contract one o' these days. When Toto comes back he'll fix it someway, Toto will."

Queenie had a distressed way of looking at April which added to the child's worry—as though she was a stranger and not Queenie's own girl. April wanted to ask Queenie so many things—why *she*

could not work now and take care of Queenie—but she could not ask the question when Queenie had that strange look in her eyes and would not talk. And she could never open the door that she did not find Mrs. Slavosky on the other side as though she had been listening. Mrs. Slavosky had cruel, gleaming eyes like Parro's the man who could twist himself into knots and had been in the side show for six weeks. His contortions had always frightened April and she had always shut her eyes so that she could not see *his* eyes—

One evening, when, sitting by Queenie's couch, she had asked Queenie, for the hundreth time, if they could not go somewhere away from Fleming Street, Queenie had answered wildly: "Where d'you *think* we can go?" and then had cried over the small hands which she had caught her own.

"When Toto comes—" she whispered in a voice so choky that poor April's heart missed a beat in alarm, "tell Toto—I've written! It's in my—writing 'folio. He'll straighten—everything. You love Toto, don't you?"

"Why, yes, Queenie. I wish Toto was here!" April bit her underlip to hide it's quiver.

"And, April, there's some money in my 'folio, too. I've been saving it—for—just in case—" she could not say the words.

April knelt by the couch. "Queenie, *don't* you feel

better to-night? Couldn't you try to walk as far as the little park down the street? There are lots of dandelions there—great big yellow fluffy ones! I saw them. It's *so* hot here—and smelly!"

Two bright spots of color burned in Queenie's cheeks. She sat upright. "Of course I can!" She cried shrilly. "You get my big cerise hat, April, I've got to take better care of myself and get out more. People'll think La Belle Queen's fallen off!" She laughed, a dreadful laugh that made April shiver "A lot *they* care—those ones who used to applaud me! *They've* forgotten Queenie! But I'll show them! I won't! I *can't*—"

"Don't, *don't,* please," begged April, frightened. "You look lots better—really! And when Toto comes—"

A strange gleam flashed across Queenie's eyes. She caught April's hand. "Promise me you won't let him despise poor Queenie. But of course he won't! *He'll* understand. He'll forgive me. Bring me my hat, child."

That night, while April lay on her cot in the corner of the room, trying not to turn and turn for fear she might disturb Queenie, Queenie died.

In that first moment of awful panic April was not sorry to find Mrs. Slavosky outside the door. The woman immediately took charge of all that had to be done; it was not the first time that a tired soul

had slipped away in the down-and-outness of No. 80! And poor April was too numb with grief to notice that there was neither kindness nor sympathy in the voice which brusquely bade her "go and stay in the front room."

The front room overlooked the narrow, dirty street and, by watching the people passing below, April could keep from wondering what was happening in that back room.

When Mrs. Slavosky had sharply questioned April, April had told her that there was no one to "tell" about Queenie's going, except Toto. Mrs. Slavosky had helped her write out a telegram which she had carefully addressed just as she had addressed her last letter to Toto, and Mrs. Slavosky had taken it away with her to give to a messenger boy.

Then some men, with heavy, grating steps, had carried poor Queenie away.

When April went back into the little dark room she had shared with her mother she found Mrs. Slavosky rummaging through the almost empty bureau drawers. In a pile on the floor lay some of her mother's and her own better garments. Others, evidently of no use to Mrs. Slavosky, had been thrown to one side. For the first time it flashed over poor April's consciousness that these pitifully few possessions were all she had in the world!

"Leave my mother's things alone!" she cried shrilly.

Mrs. Slavosky's rat-eyes gleamed cruelly. "Don't you give me any lip, young lady! *I'm* not not running no institution nor poorhouse, either. I guess these things won't pay the rent what's due me. You keep your lip to yourself or you'll be in the street—"

"When Toto comes—" April began hotly.

With her loot in her arms Mrs. Slavosky walked to the door. She smiled, though the rat-eyes still gleamed. "All right, when your Toto comes, whatever *he* is! You can sleep here until I let the room and then you can move down off the woodshed. And you come down pretty quick to the kitchen, too. I guess you can work for your keep!"

Protruding from under the woman's arm April saw a corner of the old plush portfolio.

"That's *mine!* You *can't* take that!" she implored, tears choking her voice.

"Say, now, young lady, I'm not stealing anything that isn't my due! There's nothing in this old thing but a lot of letters that isn't worth the burning and what little money's in it—well, say, didn't you want your mother buried proper like other people and don't you think *that* costs money? No one's doing it for love—not for the likes of her!"

April drew back, stunned, silenced. If it had gone for *that*—to bury poor Queenie like other people

in a pretty, peaceful, flower-strewn cemetery, well, she could say nothing more!

"And you be down in the kitchen by four o'clock if you want any dinner."

Poor little terrified April! She lost faith, then, even in Toto's coming. She sat crouched by her door listening for a ring at the front door that might mean a telegram from him. Then, when, somewhere, a clock struck three, she dragged herself down the steep, dirty stairs toward the kitchen. The kitchen door was ajar. She leaned against the wall outside it—she could not make herself go in. Her step had been so light that Mrs. Slavosky, working within, had not heard her.

"Send the girl to an orphan asylum? Well, say, Sophy Slavosky isn't no fool! I told that there Paul Pry of a doctor that the girl was my brother's child—that that Queenie woman was his wife. With help as scarce as 'tis I can use this girl. She can scrub as well as I can! And if I don't pay her nothing she can't get away, can she?"

April clapped her hands over her lips to stifle the cry that swelled in her throat. In a wild panic she fled noiselessly back up the dark stairway to her room. One thought only was in her mind—to escape as quickly as possible from 80 Fleming Street and the terrors which it held.

"Her brother's child! *Scrub! Shut in—here—*

like a prisoner!" Anger cleared the daze of grief and fire in the child's spirit.

She threw her small possessions—and what Mrs. Slavosky had left of Queenie's—into a big, worn, leather bag. Then she put Queenie's broad-brimmed cerise hat on her head and Queenie's last year's summer coat over her soiled muslin dress. She paused in her flight long enough to peep into the mirror. The young lady she saw reflected there seemed very grown-up—quite able to take care of herself when once away from the shadow of No. 80 Fleming Street.

Gripping the bulging bag she tiptoed down the stairway, through the front door into the street. She almost ran its dirty length to the corner where it let into one of the city's broader, cleaner thoroughfares. Panting, she paused. The sun was shining brightly overhead, a bell on a passing vendor's wagon clanged with a cheerful resonance; here the air was sweeter, there was space enough to see the blue of the sky—the whole world was brighter! She was away from that horrible menace—

But not so very far! She went on with quick steps, glad of the hurrying crowds which concealed her. In the throng she spied a tall young man, carrying a suitcase. A bare-footed urchin was running along by the man's side, begging to carry the bag. The man was refusing his proffered assistance but

doing so with a broad, friendly smile. The man had dropped a coin in the boy's dirty hand, too.

"He's nice," thought April. "That boy's too small to carry his bag and he knew it! But he gave him some money!" For the first time April thought of money. Then she remembered that among the contents of the satchel was Queenie's gold and rose beaded bag. Quite indifferent to the unusualness of the act she stopped at the curbing, opened the satchel and took from it the little purse. It contained two dollars and eighty cents.

That seemed a fortune to the girl—that, with the reassuring sense of escape from the darkness and threat of No. 80 Fleming Street!

So after the nice-faced man fled April, away from Mrs. Slavosky and her scheming, away from the smells and dirt of Fleming Street—and away from the letter addressed to Queenie in Toto's small, careful handwriting, which the postman at that moment was leaving at No. 80.

CHAPTER IV

The Hired Girl

Few milestones marked any changes in the quiet course of Deborah Manny's life—perhaps only three. One was that eighteenth birthday when word had come that the *Sally Ann* had gone down to sea with all hands and she knew that the lover with whom she had plighted troth would never come again into the little harbor behind the point; another when Cousin Jake Manny had died and had left her his "money," as much as a thousand dollars Blossom folk had calculated it; the third had been that October day when a fierce gale had blown down the sweet cherry tree at the back door of her home, a tree planted by her mother's own hands. Only those who live quite by themselves know what companionship there can be in a tree and can measure the loss that day brought to Miss Deborah.

Now another change threatened. Deborah Manny, who had lived alone since she was twenty-four, was going to hire a "girl." Over this news the entire village clacked, justifiably, because the entire village, by persistent persuasion, had brought it about. From the oldest villager to the youngest, each felt a personal responsibility for Deborah Manny,

a responsibility not always tempered with affection.

"Queer as all get-up but a body couldn't let Cap'n Manny's girl die there all by herself!"

(Deborah, at sixty-five, was far from dying!)

"A nice, spry girl livin' along with Debory'll be company and keep her from getting the melancholics like old Widow Snow. Do the work, too. That old house with all its rooms shut up must be a sight to do. Like as not she could get Mamie Cooper of the Lighthouse road Coopers or Sally Cox. She's sixteen now and a pretty likely girl."

But Miss Deborah, persuaded to hire the "girl," had a mind of her own as to whom she would employ.

"I'll not have Mamie Cooper or Sally Cox or Jenny Anybody—" she snorted, "—snooping about my business! I'll get a girl up from Boston way that knows how to keep her mouth shut and her eyes open."

Thereupon Miss Deborah had sent to a Boston newspaper a very unusual advertisement. She had spent a week in its composition; had counseled, too, with Miss Reed, the postmaster's daughter, who had gone to school in Portland. When completed it had read: "Wanted: a young woman with quiet ways who can cook and wash dishes without breaking them all and minds her own business and lives in fear of the Lord."

Miss Reed had protested mildly against its

phrasing. It did not sound quite like the other advertisements she had read; someone might take it as a joke and answer and cause Deborah great annoyance.

But Deborah held staunchly to her own way—in this she was like her father, the old Cap'n.

"I'll say what's *so*. I know what these hired girls are like. And if I can get one that has a wholesome fear of the Almighty and sets church above the theatre-hole down by the postoffice I'll have one that won't be gallivantin' 'round when *I* think she's put!"

The advertisement had been sent and had been printed exactly as Miss Deborah had written it. Jeremy Waite, who every morning peddled fish along the shore and every afternoon was as idle as the "lilies" volunteered to meet the afternoon train each day in the event that the "hired girl" arrived unheralded. Then all—Blossom and Jeremy—waited, breathlessly.

Miss Deborah reveled secretly in the prominence she knew she was holding in the Blossom eye. That was why, on an afternoon a week after the advertisement had appeared, she stepped to her porch, smoothed out her apron, scanned the road over which arrivals on the Boston train must come and muttered with disgust rather than eagerness: "Like as not when she *could've* come any day she'll come *to-day* 'long with that new 'Piscopal minister!"

The hotel "bus" rattled past, half-hidden in a cloud

of dust. A big motor-car honked. "The Merediths —as I live," Deborah exclaimed, quickly, with a little thrill. All Blossom enjoyed having the old house on Forest Hill open. Then a double-seated surrey came sedately down the road, at a pace suited to the arrival of a preacher of the Gospel. Deborah, momentarily forgetting her own affairs, leaned forward with a quick intake of breath. A tall stranger sat on the back seat beside Silas Perkins. She caught a glimpse of a straight nose and a square jaw.

"Why, he isn't much more'n a *boy,*" she declared aloud, wondering if Silas Perkins had not, perhaps, picked up the wrong man!

Then—"Sure as I'm standin' *here*? Didn't I *say* so?"—Jeremy Waite, with a girl on the seat beside him, a girl with a broad-brimmed cerise hat and a faded green coat.

"I got her this time, Debory," Jeremy called lustily.

Had not necessity compelled action Miss Deborah might have stood rooted to the porch step forever. With mechanical steps she walked down the little path to the road, her eyes seeing only a blaze of vivid red and faded green.

"Brung her bag'n everything, so I guess likely she'll stay longer'n over night like Mis' Thomas' new help! Did y'see the new minister, Miss Debory? And the Meredith young folks come, too. Things'll

hum now in Blossom!" A tremble in Jeremy's voice betrayed his deep excitement. He cast a side-long glance at his passenger as she climbed down over the wheel, then gave a meaning nod to Miss Deborah. "Guess I'd better go down to Casper's and hear the news and let you talk to missy, here."

Ordinarily Miss Deborah, like all Blossom, felt only a scornful tolerance for old Jeremy, but at this moment she could have implored him not to leave her alone with this strange creature. All the dignified phrases which over her work she had rehearsed in preparation for this moment now failed her utterly.

"I'm sure I'm much obliged, Jeremy," her lips framed quite of their own accord.

Then, curtly, to the girl: "Come in."

April, quivering with fright and dismay, followed Miss Manny's unfriendly back up the path to the porch.

"Sit down here and take off that ridiculous hat —so's a body can see your face!"

April meekly obeyed, dropping the offending hat behind her. Miss Manny saw a very pale face with dark frightened eyes framed in disheveled red hair.

"Why you're a—you're not a girl!"

"Oh, I am! I am!" cried April. How *could* this awful woman think she was anything else?

"I mean you ain't a girl like a—*hired* girl! What can you do?" retorted Miss Deborah crossly. She felt

that, just as Miss Reed had feared, some hoax was being played upon her—perhaps Jeremy was now laughing uproariously, down at Casper's!

"I—I—" Poor April's thoughts jumbled. "I—can turn a—a—somersault and —"

"What?"

"I mean—turn a somersault and land on my toes while the horse is running. Marky taught me. And —and dance—"

Miss Deborah edged hurriedly away.

"Who are you?" she demanded in an awful tone.

"I am April Dangerfield, La Belle Queen's daughter!" April's bobbed head tossed high.

"La—Belle—Queen!" Miss Deborah spoke the words quickly, crisply as though they might scorch her tongue.

"Yes, she was with Bushman Bros. for seventeen years. She was the most famous bareback rider—"

"Circus!" screamed Miss Deborah, and she put three feet between herself and April.

April was staring in frank astonishment.

"Haven't you ever heard of my mother? But—she's dead. I—"

For a moment anger held Deborah Manny speechless. Then: "I don't know who's crazy, Jeremy Waite or me, or wherever on earth he picked you up! *I* advertised for a girl with nice ways who could cook and not turn somersaults on horses' backs and had a

fear of the Lord and didn't wear red hats and feathers!"

"I didn't answer your advertisement," implored April. "I just came! I—I *had* to go somewhere, so I came here 'cause I had just money enough to buy a ticket like that nice man had. I followed him, you see."

"Followed him! *Followed a man!*" Plainly Miss Deborah had never been so horrified in her life!

"Yes. You see I ran away from that place—where mother died. They were going to shut me up. Oh, it was dreadful—" Then April realized that there was no sympathy in the face confronting her. Her pride came to her rescue. Defiance wakened in her soul.

"That old man said you were looking for a—for someone to help you. I will work—I will do anything."

"You'll go back where you came from," snapped Miss Deborah. Then, when she saw the real terror in April's eyes, she added: "Though you can't go until the train goes, and that don't go until morning, so you can give me a hand with supper and sleep here to-night."

April drew a long quivering breath. The color rushed back into her face, softening its strain. She looked more like the child she was.

"Oh, I'll help, indeed I will! I can do lots of

things. I don't know what your name is—all of it. The funny old man said it in such a queer way. It isn't like he said it, is it? I always like to think of people's names and have them sound just like the people, don't you? Don't you think Queenie—"

"My name's Deborah Steele Manny, but I don't know as it matters what you or Jeremy Waite calls me!"

"Deborah! What an ugly, fat sounding name," April cried. "And just Deb is too—too—oh, not respectful. Of course I shall call you Miss Manny until I can think—"

"Until the nine-thirty train back to Boston to-morrow morning."

April ignored the determination in Miss Deborah's voice. "To-morrow morning" seemed a long time away. With resolute cheerfulness she followed Miss Manny through the door into the house.

"Can't we get supper now? I'm dreadful hungry! Do you live all alone? Mr. Jeremy said it was 'too bad.' This is a darling house, isn't it? It's like a story-book house, all tumbly and mysterious. It smells so good, too! Oh, *what* a darling boat! Was that—one of your toys?"

Miss Deborah sniffed. "That" was the treasured model of Cap'n Manny's first schooner. Toy!

April was exclaiming over other wonders of the room. Presently, in the window, she came upon Miss Deborah's "work."

"Oh, what queer flowers! Are they flowers? They're so—they look like flowers with the hearts taken out."

"They're waxed," Miss Manny answered proudly. "Those are off old Mis' Tyler's grave. Mary Tyler picked out the pink roses and the white roses and I'm goin' to fix them in a nice wreath—"

April had drawn away with a shivering gesture. "What—what will she do with them?"

"What will she *do* with them? Why, hang them in her parlor, I suppose. Mis' Tubbs had me make the ones off'n her husband's grave into a bunch hanging like over a cross. They were beautiful if I do say so. I've sent some pieces to Boston. I guess I'm the only one in these parts who knows how to do it, and I get orders real often. That's why I had to hire for help 'round the house."

April reached out very slowly and touched one of the waxen petals. A rush of tears suddenly blinded her eyes. She was wondering if there had been any flowers on Queenie's grave! But, then, she would never have taken any of the blossoms away—

"Take those blue and white dishes and see if you can set the table without breaking any. All the wax flowers in the world couldn't buy one of them cups! One of the summer boarders down at the cape offered me a hundred dollars for the set just as 'twas. Be spry. I'll beat up some biscuits."

Magically April's heart lightened. With a child's instinct she knew that Miss Deborah was not nearly as cross as she wished to appear. Her blue and white dishes were beautiful and April loved beautiful things. She was hungry, too, and the pleasant odors from the kitchen were most satisfying. To-morrow seemed a long time off, and the quiet old house safely remote from the terrors of Fleming Street.

April knew more, it appeared, about cooking than Miss Manny had expected. Her knowledge had been gained chiefly from chafing-dish experience. "Toto liked this—" or "Toto liked that!" A Toto figured often in April's flow of chatter. Though Miss Deborah's lips tightened perceptibly each time, she offered no rebuke. The nine-thirty train on the morrow would settle everything!

April consumed biscuits and jam with a childish zeal. She drank, tea, too, with the air of one who knew every blend. "It's good rich milk you ought to have to put some flesh on your bones," Miss Deborah had remarked. "If you was going to stay—" she had added hastily. There was cold rhubarb pie over which April gleefully smacked her lips.

"Oh, let me wash them, please," April implored, gathering a pile of dishes with such haste that Miss Manny shuddered. "I love soap suds when they look like whipped cream! And I won't break a single dish —they're so pretty I love to touch them. Please!"

And before Miss Deborah knew it she had been pushed from the sink and April was vigorously pumping water into the steaming dishpan.

But if there threatened the slightest softening of Deborah Manny's will she had only to hark back to April's word of the "circus." Miss Manny's stern, narrow bringing up set such people apart as being little worse than the devil himself. Let one word of all this reach the ears of Blossom, what would they say? What would they think? How might not she, Deborah Manny, who hadn't missed but two days in her life in regular attendance at the First Baptist Church at the four corners, be branded if she "cow-towed" with even the child of a bareback rider?

The dishes done Miss Manny, with determined unfriendliness, escorted April and her baggage to the little room over the kitchen which she had cleaned and aired and made ready for the "hired girl." Though the sky was still pink with a twilight glow, to April, after the sleepless nights at No. 80 Fleming Street, and the strange happenings of the day, the little four-posted bed in the corner looked very inviting.

"You can turn back that spread careful 'slong as you ain't going to use it more'n the one night," was Miss Deborah's good-night. Then she went out and closed the door quickly behind her.

Miss Deborah herself slept in the gable bedroom.

It had been hers since was a child. From its window she had watched for the coming of her young lover, years ago, before the *Sally Ann* had gone down. The other rooms her mother's, her sister's, the spare room, were always closed now except at the two seasons when they were cleaned and aired.

Strangely enough the presence of the child in the house changed its atmosphere. Miss Deborah felt (in spite of herself) a pleasing sense of companionship; just knowing that there was someone else near helped her go off to sleep more quickly. That was what old Dr. Tom and Mrs. Moffett had said.

But in the small hours of the night a rush of steps wakened her. Before she could exclaim two arms went tightly about her neck.

"*Don't* let them! *Don't* let them!" April's voice was shrill with terror.

"Land a' sakes! Wake *up!*" Miss Manny caught the child and shook her. "You're in a nightmare. Scaring a body to—"

Slowly April relaxed the clinging clasp of her arms. Her eyes, burning in the darkness, lost their terror. A shiver ran from her head to her feet. Exhausted, she threw herself across Miss Deborah's piecework quilt and sobbed convulsively.

"They were stealing—my mother. They thought she was—dead and—she wasn't—'cause she spoke to me! And I wanted help. But—I—I—wish it *wasn't*

—a dream—'cause then —I'd *have* her! I want her! I want Toto! I want—"

So childishly hopeless and despairing was the wailing voice, so small seemed the slim little figure in its scant robe, that Deborah's heart, maternal without maternity, stirred. She drew the trembling child to her. "There—there—"she crooned, because she knew nothing more to say. "You're all upset by bad dreams. Just you crawl in here next to the wall along side o' me and you'll go to sleep in no time! You're as cold as ice. Cover up—there now. You poor little thing."

CHAPTER V

Deborah Decides

"Yes, she's goin' to stay, Jeremy! I'll tell you now 'slong as I expect that's why you've come round with your fish 'n hour earlier than usual. Mebbe I'm crazy what with makin' up my mind to take steps I never thought o' treadin' before and what with lyin' awake staring at that 'God Bless Our Home' my mother made when she was a girl all night 'til I could've counted the stitches. And mebbe I'm crazier to tell you I *think* I'm crazy—" Miss Deborah snapped her lips together tightly, concluding, suddenly, that she had said quite enough to Jeremy.

On the morning following April's arrival Jeremy had come to Miss Deborah's door at a very early hour. He leaned on her gate in a stay-awhile manner, twisting a long piece of grass in his mouth and shifting his eyes from time to time in the direction of Miss Deborah's open door.

"Hope she'll stay," he drawled. "Most o' them doesn't. Didn't 'pear to me she looked much like no hired gals *I* ever seen."

In spite of a heroic effort at calmness Miss Deborah's voice trembled slightly.

"Jeremy, 's long as you're going to peddle my

business 'long with your fish you might as well have straight goods so to speak—all wool and a yard wide. I've been thinking I don't know as I *need* a hired girl. I'm strong and there ain't much to do round the house 'cept at cleaning times, and I can get Sarah Swan in then like I've always done. I'm going to keep this girl for—comp'ny."

The straw fell from Jeremy's mouth.

"Comp'ny?"

"Yes, comp'ny. I guess you heard me first time. Like old Cap'n Merry got that dog last spring. It gets sort of lonesome now I'm growin' old and when I putter 'round my work she can be right handy and soci'ble. I'm not saying how *long* I'll keep her. I'm going to stick by my first declaration to have a girl that'll respect the ways of the Lord and won't break my blue and white set."

Jeremy scratched his head thoughtfully. "She looked like a gal got up like one o' them circus posters you see down Boston way."

Deborah shivered and paled with alarm.

"Never you mind, Jeremy, how she was got *up!* Those were borrowed clothes, I guess. She ain't much more'n a child, and she's seen a heap of trouble, and no one can say I ever turned one of God's creatures from my door even's much as a cat. Now just weigh out my fish and go 'long, and when folks talk you just tell them I can want comp'ny same as Joe

Merry, and *I* ain't going to waste victuals on a dog!"

Jeremy raised himself slowly from his lounging position against the gate post. He caught the tone of dismissal in Miss Deborah's voice.

"Hope ye ain't thinkin' any meddlin' meant, Debory. Courst ye've the right to comp'ny same as Joe, and folks'll be glad ye have it. Hope the gal won't stir things up this end o' town like Joe's dog has —fightin' ev'ry thing on four legs and some on two! Though 'tain't likely she will. What's her name, Debory, if ye don't mind tellin?"

"Her name—" Deborah spoke slowly—she *did* mind, "—is—Aprilly."

"A-pril-ly?"

"I said it, didn't I? It's a fancier name than I set much by but all the world don't get christened in Blossom."

"A-pril-ly!" Jeremy whistled. "Don' know as I ever *heard* of a gal named Aprilly. Kind of wildy like, don't seem to go with brooms and kettles and pans—"

"Any more'n she does, Jeremy. A hired girl's one thing, but Aprilly's another!"

"That's right—she's comp'ny. And it ain't likely you'll get tired, Debory, with an Aprilly 'round like you would a Jane or—or—a—"

"Jeremy," added Deborah, tartly, taking her bundle of fish.

"Mebbe I'd better carry it up fer ye, Debory?"

Deborah clicked her gate shut defiantly.

"Since when can't I carry my own fish, Jeremy? I see Widow Sims sittin' on her step waiting for you, and its your busy day what with the new minister and the Meredith's comin'! Don't you forget 'bout the straight goods. Mebbe your tongue does wag at both ends, Jeremy, that's not your fault, it's the way your tongue's made, but you can make it wag *straight!*"

For some moments Deborah Manny stood at her gate watching the fish man's departing figure. A strange emotion shook her.

"You're a *fool,* Debory Manny—*a fool!* You've said you'd keep her right when you didn't know whether you would or wouldn't! You can't eat your words when you've given them to Jeremy Waite. You're doin' something that if this town *knew*—" She drew her breath sharply. "If Jeremy'd guessed it'd been all over Blossom by *noon* that you was keeping a girl from the circus."

She laughed suddenly, aloud, with one hand at her heart as though to quiet its sudden beating. Her world in the last twelve hours had turned upside down; she had done things she had never done before in her life; she had *felt* things—a life-long prejudice yielding momentarily before a curious, foolish sense of mothering, all because a quivery little creature, sobbing in fitful sleep and clinging with hot fingers, had

snuggled close to her. And after a sleepless night she, Deborah Manny, had crept from bed, dressed noiselessly so as not to disturb the "girl," and had stolen down stairs in her stocking feet to prepare the breakfast while the "girl" slept on, upstairs.

The morning, with its accustomed duties brought some degree of order back to Miss Deborah's mind. She was going to keep the girl—already Jeremy was spreading it broadcast that the girl was to be "comp'ny," so there remained for her, now, the necessity of guarding carefully the secret that April was of the "circus."

In Miss Deborah's room above April Dangerfield was slowly, with a difficulty that was painful, waking to a realization of the strange things about her—the quaint old bureau, the straight-backed, rush-bottomed chairs set primly against the wall, the "sampler" which Deborah's baby hands had made, the "God Bless Our Home," cross-stitched in wool, and framed in sea-shells, the pleasant odors wafted from below, and the unutterable quiet.

Then Miss Deborah faced her in the frame of the open door.

"Oh, it is dreadfully late?" April remembered the "nine-thirty." "Has—has the train gone?"

Deborah Manny swallowed twice. "The nine-thirty's gone. I've 'bout made up my mind to try you. 'Pears to me I don't need you much as you need

me, but I guess mebbe it'll work both ways. But we might's well have an understandin' this minit that's long as you're under this roof there's to be no mentionin' of circuses or circus ways or folks, for I don't want the Manny name to be draggin' 'round in the dust. I don't s'pose there's much you can do until you learn, but you can get up and do it, and you'd better put on this blue print o' mine 'cause I don't want to lay eyes on those fixins you brought down here with you."

While Miss Manny was speaking April had been slowly rising. At the conclusion of her outburst the girl stood poised in the center of the room, a slim little thing in her clinging robe. She threw out her hands toward Miss Manny with a gesture which threatened that good soul. Her face, which a moment before had been white, flushed rosy pink and her eyes darkened.

"Really? Oh, I'll wear anything—*any* old thing, and oh, I'll work so hard and I'll promise anything you want me to if I may stay until—Toto comes! Oh *please,* I *have* to speak of him because he's all I've got and he's— But I will try not to speak out *loud.* I'll just think. I'll dress fast. Do you mind my undergarments? They're 'most worn out, anyway. Oh, oh, I could *hug* you!" Miss Manny took a retreating step. April stared about her. "I re-member," she said slowly. "I had a dreadful dream. I

came to you. Oh—I—wish—" Tears were very close.

"Just you forget your bad dreams, Aprilly." In spite of herself Miss Manny's voice was kind. "You're here in Blossom safe s'can be, and if you mind your p's and q's you can stay here. Now run in and dress and come down and we'll have some breakfast."

"April-ly! Oh, how *funny*. No one *ever* called me that. I like it—from you, 'cause you're so different from anyone I ever knew in the—in the—Oh, I'll remember! *Don't* look so cross. And see if I don't hurry!" April snatched the blue print and fled to the back bedroom.

Before the sun had set on that eventful day April Dangerfield was established in the Manny household. It had happened joyously for the girl, not so smoothly for poor Miss Deborah. In the ship-shape rooms of the old house, with their quaint, simple furnishings, April had found countless things which she noisily proclaimed "darling" and "funny" and "precious." Again and again she ran to the door which opened upon the narrow porch and drew in long breaths of the sea-sweet air. To the child who had just come from the squalor and darkness of Fleming Street the bit of yard between the house and the picket fence, its grass and flower-beds sadly neglected but shaded by crowding elms, ages old, was more beautiful than

the most beautiful park she had ever seen in the long walks with Claribel. But it was not easy for poor Miss Deborah to become in a moment accustomed to either the bursts of song and laughter or the threats of tears and the shadow which, at some sudden memory, would swiftly cross April's face. A hundred times at least, the girl had "set her nerves all every which way with her helter-skelter ways"; moreover poor Deborah lived in a perpetual horror that April might kiss her. (Daylight had made her forget the thrill she had felt the night before when clinging hands had pressed against her.)

The "circus" clothes had all been packed away in a chest in the attic. "They ought t' be burned, but I s'spose it's wicked to burn good cloth even if *'tis* sewed up in fuss and feathers." The "blue print" fitted April as though it had been made for her; its simplicity set off the prettiness of her oval-shaped face, and its color enhanced the reddish gleams in her short curly hair.

So full was the day of wonder for April that it closed a door upon the tragedy she had only just lived through. She forgot Mrs. Slavosky and Fleming Street—even, for the moment, poor Queenie. Youth is blessed; life is selfishly strong in young veins.

However, she avoided the waxen flowers from Mrs. Tyler's grave. As she watched Miss Deborah turning them and twisting them she felt an

inexplainable shrinking. The supper dishes (the blue and white set with not a cup or saucer so much as chipped) had been put away. A glorious purplish and pink twilight had set in.

Suddenly Deborah dropped a white rose in her lap.

"Land o' sakes, I'd clean forgotten the new 'Piscopal minister!"

April danced before her, alive with interest.

"Oh, was he—was he—my Mr. Nice-face?"

Deborah frowned. "Set down and don't jig in front of a body. If you mean the man you—*followed,* don't let me hear another word 'bout it. *I* meant the new 'Piscopal minister what come to St. Stephen's yesterday. I'm a Baptist, but a Baptist can be interested in a 'Piscopal. It isn't reverend for you to be calling a new minister by light names—he's the Rev. Mr. Michael Brown.

April was too crestfallen to heed the rebuke.

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"You'd better be. *I'm* sorry I got so short with Jeremy 'fore he told me all 'bout the new man. He looked like one of these college students. His hat certainly wa'nt much like a preacher of the Gospel—light gray and all soft! Now *I* think black's fittin'."

"*I'm* sorry," April paused tragically, "'cause he's a minister at *all.* I think it's horrid. They're unlucky!"

"Unlucky!"

"Dreadfully. Ridoo, the—the—I can't tell you what he was because you made me promise, you see, said that one of them a mile off always puts a hoodoo on a—oh, *you* know! And on trains and boats, too. Oh, dear, I remember now he did have a collar on that didn't stop in front but went right around behind. I I was so frightened I didn't think much about that. But I'm going to always call him my Mr. Nice-face."

"Aprilly!" Deborah's voice was terrible in its sternness. April added, entreatingly.

"Just to myself, Miss Deborah. *That* can't be not reverend. And, oh, do tell me who were the girls and the boy who came on the train that day?" To April "that day" seemed ages past. "One they called Rose, and I liked her. She was ever so pretty."

"The Merediths—up at Forest Hill. The Merediths ain't a New England family, but Car'line Truitt married a Meredith. There's been Truitts in Blossom ever since the *Mayflower* come over, I guess. Only Car'line's grandpa was the last that ever stayed. Her own pa went off to college and after that Blossom wa'nt lively enough for him same as with Car'line. She keeps old Cyrenus Todd and his wife there to keep things aired and ready and she comes up here to rest. It makes things here nice and lively when the young folks come up. I don't know who your Rose is, but seems to me I heard tell of a cousin on the

Meredith side. Anyways Blossom ain't so big that you won't know them all pretty soon!"

"Then Chrissy must be Chrissy Meredith. And how old is she? Where does she go to school? Oh, I went to school for just six weeks, and it was *such fun!* There were nice girls there, like Rose. I felt awfully shy, though, 'cause you see I wasn't used to going—" April stopped suddenly, alarmed at the consternation in Miss Deborah's face.

"The size of you and no schoolin'?" Her words were half denunciation, half interrogation. April laughed her relief.

"Oh, yes, lots and lots, but it was different. Toto always taught me. Oh, please, I didn't mean to speak of him! But I wish you knew Toto. You'd love him. He isn't a *bit* like a clown."

Miss Deborah stiffened so suddenly that her flowers fell about her.

"It ain't likely that I *want* to know the likes of your Toto or whatever you call him. And it won't hurt you a speck to have more schoolin' in the fall—if you're here. Nor Sunday schoolin' either."

April was on her knees straightening the poor flowers—not caring now that they had marked Mrs. Tyler's grave. She hummed a catchy bit of a refrain.

"Oh, I am so happy, Miss Deborah, just because I feel so—so—sort of—taken care of! I don't believe there's a *thing* in Blossom I will not just love—even

Sunday schooling. And it's jolly knowing Mr. Nice—h'm, the Reverend Mister Michael Brown, and Chrissy and Rose. I feel as though I *belong*. May I run out by the gate and just watch the road? Will you need me?"

Deborah answered shortly that she did not. She held her flowers loosely in her hand while she watched the slim little figure in the blueprint dance out into the shadowy twilight. Something strange caught in her throat. Then she shook herself.

"No need your swallowin your Adam's Apple, Debory Manny, over a red-headed girl that can't do nothing but sing and laugh all the time." She twisted her lips into a grim line. "You *wanted* a God-fearin' hired girl and you've got a circus performer's brat! Well, Blossom ain't going to know it if *you* can help it!"

CHAPTER VI

April Meets the Merediths

Blossom had its main street, its aristocracy, and its "new people."

Sneed's Emporium and the Post Office, flanked on the right by the old Tavern, known as the Armes House, made the Hub of the town. Opposite this center of commerce a strip of rough common, shaded by spreading elms and dignified by a gaudily painted bandstand, served as a gathering place for the whole county. A row of rotting hitching posts outlined the common. Across from the Post Office was the First Baptist Church, of red brick and squatty in line. To the right of the common the main street straggled off for a quarter of a mile, then turned abruptly into the "station road." At the turn stood St. Stephen's, its weather-worn steeple almost hidden by the sheltering trees. Back of it, hedged in by barberry and overgrown with myrtle, rested past generations of Blossom folk. An opening through the hedge led to the Rectory garden.

Blossom's "aristocracy," because it was made up of men who followed the sea, lived out toward the Cove. Those hardy ones had built their homes where, from the small-paned windows, their women folk

could watch the ships sail in behind the Point. It had come to be called the Lighthouse Road.

Though men of the later generations had taken up other callings and had moved away, others became masters of the big ships which steamed in and out of Boston harbor and came to Blossom only once in a great while, others, like Lymus Lee's father and Captain Manny, had added to their acres and tilled the soil with only a wistful thought now and then seaward, though the Cove, once alive with sails, was deserted except for a few fishermen and the summer picnicers and the old stone lighthouse on Windover Point had been abandoned for a new range light on Peter's Island, ten miles up the coast, the Lighthouse Road had remained, and would always be the aristocratic highway of Blossom.

Blossom had its legend, too—a legend of the sea, as befitted Blossom traditions. Early in the history of the place Captain Ephraim Blossom sailed the good ship *Queen Bess* in and out of the Cove. In the small cottage on the point Ephraim's young wife, Priscilla, kept things ship-shape, mended her husband's nets, and was beloved throughout the county because of her winsome ways. But there came a day when Captain Ephraim sailed out of the Cove on his last voyage; a day of storm and ill-omen, so the story had it, a day when fishermen's wives gathered at the Cove and lingered there whispering together, with bent

heads and worried eyes. At nightfall the fishermen, one by one, had returned, but none had sighted the good *Queen Bess*. Louder and louder boomed the gale—the tide was out; no boat attempting to make the Cove could escape the Devil's Shoal, south of the Point. But little Priscilla Blossom had not been made of the stuff that wailed and wrung its hands. After seeing to it that her own hearth-fire was glowing, she had braved the menace of the gale and had gone to the far end of the Point where huge waves lashed the rocks with such fury that the hissing water eddied about her very feet. There she had stood all through the night waving at the end of a long pole her danger signal. In the morning neighbors had found her at her watch. The lashing wind had broken the pole; the young wife, exhausted, had sunk down upon the wet rocks.

"He is calling me, can't you hear him?" she had moaned over and over. Then, while they stood, frightened, staring out across the angry waters she had given a wild cry and had plunged down into the seething depths.

That afternoon the wreckage of the *Queen Bess* had been washed into the Cove. Nothing was ever seen of either Captain Ephraim or little Mistress Priscilla; somewhere they were united. But from that day to this, the story had it, on windy nights in the little stone cottage on Windover Point, the two

whispered together by the open hearth. Captain Joe Merry who, in later years, had bought the cottage, declared he'd heard it, many a time. "Sort of friendli-like to have 'em there," he had said boastfully, but nevertheless he and his wife had moved into the old Sturgis house farther down on Lighthouse Road, and Windover Cottage had gone untenanted.

Years ago Ebenezer Truitt had abandoned the sea to establish a shipyard at the Cove. So successful was his enterprise that he built, on a rise of ground overlooking his ways, a pretentious house of red brick, with spacious gables and broad porches. Blossom people called it Forest Hill because at its back stretched a thick belt of woodland. After two generations the shipyard had been abandoned; only a few old rotting timbers stood in the Cove to attest to the days of bustle and activity; younger Truitts had sought their livelihoods in big cities, had grown, indeed, to look upon Forest Hill as only a haven for their old age. By inheritance it had finally come to Caroline Truitt, who had married Thomas Meredith, unknown in Blossom until the day he had come there with his bride to spend their honeymoon.

The Meredith's had a house in New York and a camp in the Adirondacks, so that they spent little time at Forest Hill. Cyrenus Todd and his wife lived in two rooms over the big kitchen; at infrequent intervals Mrs. Cyrenus aired and dusted the unused rooms,

while Cyrenus clipped the hedges, mowed the lawns weeded the flowerbeds and repaired shutters and shingles. In spite of them both, however, about the old place hung a melancholy air—as of something abandoned, outgrown, unwanted.

Chrissy Truitt Meredith, Caroline Truitt's only daughter, felt this. "Every time I come to Forest Hill," she confided to her cousin Rose, one evening soon after their arrival in Blossom, as the two idly swung in a hammock on the wide porch of the old house,"this house gets on my nerves. It' so dreadfully silent! I feel as though we were all of us out of place—like going to a funeral in your sport clothes, loaded down with picnic stuff. It must have been dreadful for mother to live here when she was a girl, you know. Only she went away to school, just like I do."

Her cousin Rose thought Forest Hill "lovely." From each of her windows she could glimpse blue stretches of the sea between the trees. And a short walk through a beech wood took them to the sandy cove.

"Of course," went on Chrissy, "if we could fill the place with a lot of girls and boys it would be heaps of fun. But mother only comes here when she wants to rest. When I'm old I'm never going to rest. I think Dad ships us up here, too, when he wants to get rid of us. If there was only some one in the town that one could even speak to."

In spite of Chrissy's gloom Rose refused to see anything but the bright side of Forest Hill and Blossom.

"Perhaps there is," she suggested hopefully. "There must be nice people in those dear little houses—"

Chrissy sniffed contemptously; then she straightened suddenly. She had spied Keith coming up the gravel drive. "Any letters?" she called loudly.

Keith held out his hands to signify that they were empty. He wore white flannels and a soft shirt open at the throat. His head was bare. He was whistling in a cheery way as though he thought the world a very jolly world indeed.

With a groan Chrissy sank back into the depths of the hammock.

"Why, you silly, we've only been here three days! How many letters did you expect?"

"If the girls only knew how lonesome—"

"Why don't you do something besides knit all the time?" demanded her brother. He stretched himself comfortably in one of the wicker chairs. "Look at me! I don't——"

"Knit, I suppose you are going to say. How strange! Were the lights of Broadway as bright as ever?"

Keith ignored her withering sarcasm. "It's all

kinds of fun hanging 'round the Post Office and talking to the people." He directed his conversation to Rose. "They're all a nice crowd—only different. They're just as good as we are, only Chrissy won't think so. Mother was born here, you see, and knows all these people by their first names—"

"Keith Meredith, how she'd scold you if she could hear you. Of course one can't help where one is born, but mother went away to school when she was very little—"

"Say," Keith broke in, "I saw that girl who came down on the train with us."

Both Rose and Chrissy sat bolt upright in their interest.

"Really? Did you? Did she have on that scream of a hat?" This from Chrissy.

"Oh, how do I know what kind of a hat she had on? She was bare-headed, anyway. And she's pretty —prettier than you or—Rose."

"Oh, *thank* you! Who is she? Where does she live?"

"Why don't you stir off this veranda and find out things yourself? Her name is April something-or-other, and she's staying at Deborah Manny's—"

"A—a servant?"

"N-no, just as company or to help her, I guess. She said she loved Miss Manny!" This with a reminiscent chuckle.

"Did you *speak* to her?" Chrissy's tone was scandalized.

"Why, of course, I asked her how she liked Blossom."

"Keith Meredith, you're just common! Talking to any kind of a girl! I know what mother'll say to you if I tell her. She's probably nothing but a plain, hired girl."

Keith curled his arms about his knees and hugged them. He loved to tease his sister.

"Well, old Jeremy says she's Miss Manny's 'comp'ny,' but maybe that's the same as hired girl. but she's not *plain! I'll* say not."

"Sh-h!" implored Rose leaning suddenly forward. "Chrissy—Keith, isn't that she—coming now?"

Up the winding drive that led to the house from the road, her head thrown back so that the soft breeze caught her short hair and blew it in pretty disorder about her temples, half running, half skipping, came April.

Chrissy and Rose sprang from the hammock in a half-guilty confusion. Keith stepped forward politely.

April's cheeks were flushed from her hurry rather than any embarrassment. She came lightly up the steps, one hand outstretched. On her face was frank and friendly curiosity.

"Isn't it nice that Miss Manny sent me up here on an errand? I have wanted to see you girls again ever since that afternoon on the train. I'm April Dangerfield, and I know who you all are because Miss Manny told me. Oh, doesn't that smell good!" rapturously sniffing toward the ocean.

"Do come and sit down," Chrissy murmured politely. Keith drew forward one of the low chairs. April sank into it with a wide smile which took in the three of them. Then, aghast, she gripped the small package she carried.

"Oh, dear *me,* as Miss Manny would say, where *is* my head! I'd have forgetten this thing, and it's the reason I came!" She laughed, a little throaty laugh that brought smiles to the others' faces. "Behold, Deborah Manny's Gooseberry Preserve, made from the recipe of her great-great-grandmother! And here's the recipe. 'Car'line Truitt asked me for my gooseberry preserve recipe as good as three years ago when she stopped right here at my house for it, and it went clean out of my mind from that day 'til this, and I saw Car'line Truitt's boy go by here like to break his neck!' There, that's just what she said, and here's the recipe and a jar of gooseberries thrown in for apology."

April's mimicry was so deliciously like little Miss Manny that even Chrissy laughed and forgot that April was a stranger and, perhaps, a "nobody."

"I'll take it to mother. I have often heard her speak of that certain kind of gooseberry preserve." With a rustle of crisp skirts Chrissy disappeared through the door.

"You don't have to go right home, do you?" pleaded Rose, who was fascinated by April's smile. "Chrissy and I were just saying how lonely it is without the girls—the girls at school, I mean. Weren't we, Chrissy?" to Chrissy, hurrying back.

April wanted nothing on earth more than an invitation to linger with these young people. "Miss Manny said Forest Hill was beautiful, but oh, it's more than that! It's so—so hushed," April drew a quick breath, "as though lovely hopes and dreams were buried all 'round here. And whichever way you turn you can see the ocean, can't you? And isn't this the comfiest chair? Miss Manny'd have it locked up in her parlor!"

For a half hour the young people chatted about one thing and another. Then April remembered suddenly that she had promised Miss Manny to return quickly.

"Oh, I never *can* remember. Poor Miss Manny will look at me so cross. I'll have to run home so as to get there before dark. May I come again? And can't we all go exploring down on that jolly looking point. Miss Manny told me the story of poor little Mistress Blossom! I think it was lovely to name the

town after her, but then, I'm sure I'd rather be alive than to even have a town as nice as this named after me. I'm going, going, going! Good-by! Good-by!" And like a flash April raced off down the gravel drive.

Not one of the three Merediths said a word until April, with a last wave of a small white hand, swung into the road. Then Keith turned triumphantly.

"Didn't I tell you she was the prettiest thing?"

Chrissy sniffed. April's charm, for her, had broken with April's disappearance. "If you call a thin thing like her in that funny apron effect the prettiest."

"But Chrissy," Rose was moved to champion Keith. "That was it. Even in that calico she looked just as well dressed as anyone. And she's—she's different— " Rose groped for the words she needed to convey her impression, "she's so sparkly! And you want to laugh all the time."

"Her hair isn't as pretty as yours, Rose. It's lots redder."

"She looked jolly like a boy. I'll bet she'd be fun fishing and hiking," declared Keith.

Chrissy yawned. "Of course there's no accounting for taste," with a withering glance sidewise at Keith, "but anyway she's something up here in this desolation, and I shall speak to her again when I see her."

"Why, *Chrissy!*" cried Rose, scarcely believing her ears. She shut her lips upon the rebuke which sprang to them. She stood a little in awe of her

cousin, not so much because Chrissy was six whole months older as because she was much more experienced in the ways of the world, and never failed to remind Rose of that fact. "I'm glad we know her," Rose finished. "She's—she's mysterious." At last she had found the word she wanted. It pleased her to think that they knew nothing of the whimsical little stranger who had blown in and out of their evening quiet.

Meantime in Miss Manny's kitchen, April, breathless, astride of a wooden chair, was telling Miss Manny that she had met the Merediths.

"They're just dears," she cried, enthusiastically. "Chrissy looked like a picture out of a fashion plate—all pinky and ruffly and she had the darlingest feet, but I liked Rose best—her hair's red, but it isn't as red as mine, and she's dear, and Keith's nice, too. Oh, I feel as though I had always wanted to know just those girls! May I go picnicing with them some day?"

Miss Deborah bent her head low over the table.

"Did you—did you—tell them—about—the circus?"

April smothered a little sigh. "Of course not. I couldn't. I'd promised you. But, oh—I wanted to."

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Nice-face

"Oh, please, *please,* Miss Manny."

April, kneeling before Miss Manny, a wreath of waxed flowers on her flattened palms, lifted dancing eyes to the woman's face.

No longer had April any dread of the waxen blossoms. When Miss Manny worked at her little table in the west window April sat "at her elbow" and watched each movement of the thin, work-hardened fingers. She listened delightedly to Miss Manny's reminisences, awakened by the drooping flowers, of the lilies-of-the-valley which had been spread like a blanket over Sara Cullen's little sister's grave (April had thought it very lovely to sleep under lilies-of-the-valley); of the pink roses which Minnie Howe's brother's wife had sent from Boston, and which Deborah Manny thought "next thing to an insult—pink roses!" And then, "those flowers off Carrie Maytham's grave—her sister gave me the whole lot so's to have some on hand. She didn't want any piece at all. Carrie was a sort of misfit in her fam'ly anyways; made trouble right up to the minit of her fun'ral. Didn't the cuckoo clock her uncle give her

Xmas before last up and cuckoo just when the minister was saying 'Let us pray.' Mebbe that wasn't Carrie's fault, but ev'ry one sort of thought she had a hand in it!" April felt as though she knew those quiet sleepers in the little graveyard far better than the men and women who stared at her with frank curiosity when she went to the post office.

The pretty wreath she held had inspired her.

"Oh, please, Miss Manny, make one for Mr. Nice—I mean the Mr. Rev. Michael Brown. It'd be like a gift of welcome. It must be terribly hard to come to a strange place where you don't know whether people are going to be nice to you or not!" A tragic note creeping into April's voice, betrayed that her words came straight from her heart.

"It'd be a nice enough thing to do, I guess. But who ever heard tell of a Baptist giving a 'Piscopal presents? Why the whole town'd be up and talking."

This was beyond April's understanding. The fine divisions, plain to Miss Manny, between her "Baptists" and "'Piscopals" did not exist for her.

"He'd like it all the better because you are a Baptist, Miss Manny. And I'll take it to him! Then we'll get acquainted just the way I did with the Merediths when I took the gooseberry preserve to them."

Miss Manny shook her head. Her poor head, indeed, had been, to use her own grieved expression, "going right'round in a circle," trying to keep up with

her new "charge." "I thought, Deborah Manny, you always knew what was what, until you took that girl," she had more than once inwardly grumbled.

"I don't know as it's right to send presents by a girl like you—"

"Oh, please, Miss Manny! When you think of a nice thing to do you ought to do it right off quick or you'll begin to see reasons why maybe you shouldn't do it, and then while you're fussing—why, it's too late! There isn't anyone in Blossom who could send him a pretty little gift of welcome like this. And I'll just take it and say how-do-you-do and come back as quickly as anything."

"Like as not the poor fellow's beside himself with that housekeeper," mused Miss Manny. I always say there's two kinds of women, them that keeps the kettle boilin' and ready and them that keeps their kettle boilin' cold, and Mrs. Prowett's the last kind—always was and always will be, her mother was before her. And a young man like he looked to be wouldn't know what *was* the matter! I don't know as it would do a bit of harm to make up a pretty little wreath he could hang up on his wall! It might help him to write good sermons."

April clapped her hands. "Of course it would. And let's pick out the brightest flowers—" In a flash she was sorting over the waxed blossoms.

As "comp'ny" for Miss Deborah April measured up to the need—and a little over; as help, she failed

dismally, but with such a pretty remorse that Miss Manny found herself endeavoring to cover over the shortcomings from even her own observation. April did not know that in the long intervals of silence, when Miss Manny sat with brooding eyes and close-shut lips, she was often rebuking herself.

"Debory Manny, if you don't stop givin' in to that girl's titivatin' ways," she was scolding now as she took the flowers April selected, "she'll be runnin' right over you."

On the following afternoon, with an excitement greater even than that she had felt when she visited Forest Hill April approached the Rectory, her "welcome token," carefully wrapped in tissue paper, in her hand. She had never in her life met a "real" minister. And, added to her curiosity, was the deep sense of gratitude she felt toward Mr. Nice-face because he had led her to Blossom and the shelter she was finding there.

She approached the Rectory through the churchyard and the adjacent graveyard, stepping lightly and carefully between the leaning stones. The door of the Rectory was wide open. Through it she caught a glimpse of a deserted kitchen. "Cluttered up," was her first thought, using Miss Manny's phrase. She knocked twice, then tiptoed softly over the threshold.

Except for its untidiness the "preacher's" kitchen was very like Miss Manny's. Then April spied a note

on the table among some unwashed plates. Quite unashamed, she read it. It was signed "Michael Brown," and told Mrs. Prowett that Michael Brown had gone to the Shore Club to play golf, and would not be home until late evening.

"Mrs. Prowett!" April called. The echo of her voice was her only answer.

"How funny!" The Mr. Rev. Michael Brown was off playing golf instead of writing a sermon and his housekeeper had evidently deserted, too. The Rectory, in its reputed untidiness, was open to the world—anyone, even a Baptist, could come in.

Gripped by curiosity, April tiptoed through the house, from one room to another. Then she softly crept upstairs, lingering at the top with bated breath to listen for any sound. She crossed quickly to an open door. It led into a long narrow room, disorderly like the others. Though the bed had been made, across it had been laid the week's laundry. On the bureau was a confusion of collars, ties, papers, even books. A square table placed in the exact centre of the room was littered with more papers, more books. Only the old-fashioned desk near the low window was conspicuous for its order.

"Here is where he writes his sermons," whispered April, and she laid Miss Manny's wreath upon it.

Then a fancy seized her. She fell to work to bring order out of the prevailing chaos. She crammed

the fresh laundry into one of the deep bureau drawers. She whisked collars and ties, books and papers, into another; she piled the books on the table in neat rows, straightened the photographs on the narrow mantel. Then just as she stepped back to survey her work she was startled by a cheery whistlng and a mannish step below.

The room offered only one refuge. At its end stood a tall walnut wardrobe. To it April fled, threw open the door, crept between the clothes hanging within and softly, very softly, closed the door behind her. She had acted none too quickly; the steps came bounding up the stairs, to the door. The whistling suddenly stopped as though the sight of the old desk in the window might have brought a more serious mood.

Then April, half-smothered among the coats and trousers, heard the crackling of paper, followed by a low chuckle. He had found the wreath. An interval of silence indicated that he was observing her efforts in his room—perhaps mentally thanking old Mrs. Prowett for her sudden housewifely activity.

How long could she live among the coats and trousers, and why *did* people pack things away in camphor! Poor April, her nose pressed against the tiniest crack in the back of the wardrobe, thought these things and many others. What would Miss Manny say if she never returned? What would

Blossom say when it knew that she had smothered in the Mr. Rev. Brown's wardrobe? And what would *he* say when he went to his wardrobe to look for gray trousers and found a little girl there instead?

But at that precise moment, when April was picturing herself sleeping under lilies-of-the-valley, a tiny tickling mastered her. "Ki-shu!" "Ki-shu!" came from the depths of the wardrobe.

Two seconds of terrible stillness, a quick step, the wardrobe door was thrown wide open, revealing to Michael Brown's startled senses, two dark blue eyes gleaming through masses of disheveled red hair.

"Come out of there!" Michael Brown could easily be forgiven for the sternness of his voice! But reason, in a flash, told him bold bandits did not have laughing blue eyes nor, as a rule, wear blue print apron dresses! In fact, as April slowly emerged from the dangling trousers and stood, a slim little thing, before him, he wanted to roar in sheer relief. But he controlled the desire.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

April suddenly began to laugh, a low little giggle —this was all so different from what she had pictured her meeting with Mr. Nice-face would be! She had practiced such a polite little speech before Miss Manny. And what would Miss Manny say if she knew that the Mr. Rev. Michael Brown had found her hanging among his clothes?

"I'm not laughing at you," April hastened to explain politely. "I'm laughing because—it's so funny!"

"Perhaps, to you! Rather unusual for me to meet a young lady—in this fashion."

"Oh, but you see I *know* you! I came with you to Blossom. You didn't know it, but I did. And I'm staying with Miss Manny. And she wanted—or she didn't want to at first, but I coaxed her—she thought she ought not to because she was a Baptist, to send you a—wreath as a sort of—oh, welcome. And I brought it over. Your house was empty. And it's really dreadfully untidy. So I thought it would be fun to straighten things up a little—here. And I was just finishing—when you came—" For sheer lack of breath April brought her confession to an end.

Now Michael Brown laughed. He picked up the wreath.

"I have heard of Miss Manny's flowers. Will you thank her for me? Or I'll stop there myself. She's very kind. I'm sorry you were frightened in your good work. But you gave me a start, too."

"Were you—were you—" April spoke in an awed tone, "going to write a sermon?"

"Sermon? No, child. I don't write many of them. I just talk. Whenever I have written them I always find I'm moved to say something else, it comes

in spite of me. I had planned to go over and play eighteen holes of golf to-day to get my brain cleared out, but I was sidetracked by a sick call. There wasn't enough time left for the golf so I came home. On the way I met Mrs. Prowett and told her to go along to her niece's. You have certainly cleared things up nicely, but do you suppose I'll be able to find anything?"

April was staring in a sort of rapture at her Mr. Nice-face. She knew his voice would be like that—deep and jolly and kindly; that when he talked he would give that twist to his lips that made one think he was going to smile. And his eyes were jolly, too, only they had heavy brows which had a way of straightening quickly, giving his face a serious look. April did not know just why she liked his chin, but she thought it was because it was like her Toto's.

"Oh—" she murmured, startled out of her pleasant absorption. "Oh—yes! Everything's right there in the top bureau drawer!"

"Say, Miss—April, is it? I've heard of you. You said something about having met me before! Suppose now, just for a sort of punishment, you come down into the kitchen with me and make me some tea and tell me all about it."

Down in the kitchen April pinched herself to make herself believe that it was all true. From a funny old cupboard Michael Brown had taken down

all sorts of things to eat while she made the tea. He insisted that they have their repast on the veranda. The tea was strong and bitter, the bread cut unevenly, the jam spilled on the cloth April had commandeered from a chest in the dining-room, but the birds sang in the high branches, the fragrance of honeysuckle filled the air, and April was aglow with delight.

Her story, as she told it to him, over the bread and jam, was very simple: "I was running away. Oh, I had to because it was a dreadful place! I saw you and followed you because you had a suitcase. And I had just enough money to buy the same kind of a ticket you did. I got on the train with you and sat behind you, and it made me feel as though I was really going with you. And then that funny old Jeremy was looking for someone, and just took me to Miss Manny—"

Michael Brown, puzzled, wanted to ask a great many questions. But, to his "Have you no parents or relations?" she shook her head, and something in the shadowed eyes held him. Some tragedy had touched the child, of that he was certain.

But in a moment the gleam of laughter came back into April's eyes. She leaned toward him across the table. "I'm ever so glad to know that ministers aren't bad at all. I was dreadfully disappointed when I found out you were a preacher! I called you Mr. Nice-face, and oh, dear, Miss Manny nearly died of horror—she said that it was very disrespectful. I

didn't mean it to be. But you see, I don't know as much about preachers as Miss Manny. I've never even gone to Sunday-school! Miss Manny says I must begin right away. I hope it'll be as nice as the beautiful books I used to read. I guess I'll go to a Baptist Sunday-school. She—Miss Manny, thinks that's better. It would be dreadful to go to hell, wouldn't it? I never thought much about it, but Miss Manny says I'll know all about it when I begin to go to Sunday-school."

April was dismayed at the suddenness with which Michael Brown's brows drew together. But his lips twitched.

While April chattered on Michael Brown listened and pondered. Like Rose, he was stirred by the "mystery" of this will-o-the-wisp. She was no waif, there was every evidence that she had been reared carefully; there was about her the pretty audacity of one who has been petted by many; she had a childish trust in her fellow mortals. And yet, friendless, she had fled after him to Blossom!

"Are you happy at Miss Manny's?" he asked so suddenly that April dropped a piece of bread and jam, jam side down.

"Oh-h, yes! Sometimes, when she's cross looking I'm a little afraid of her. She's so different from—from—oh, the family, you know. And there are so many things she thinks about, things that I can't

understand! Perhaps, some day, I can ask you. She thinks so many things are dreadfully wicked, like—" April flushed under the embarrassment of not being able to speak frankly. With resolute effort she smiled. "Anyway, Toto—he's my dearest friend—will come sometime, I know. And Blossom is beautiful and I love the sea and I have Chrissy and Rose and Keith Meredith for my friends and I *will* be happy!" The last words came with a determined lift of the small chin.

Moved by a brave defiance in the girl's face Michael Brown reached out and patted the small, jam-stained fingers.

"If I'm responsible for bringing you here, Miss April, I shall have to look after you. Please count me in your circle of friends, will you? Miss Manny is a fine soul, you must always feel very loyal to her, but when anything bothers very much come to me and talk it out! And you need only say just what you want to!"

April's eyes, dark with pleasure, opened wide. "How did you *guess* that I'd promised Miss Manny not to—to talk! Oh, you're wonderful! And we will be friends, won't we? And you won't mind if I call you Mr. Nice-face? It's so much friendlier than the Mr. Rev. Michael Brown. Oh, I'm so glad Miss Manny sent you the welcome wreath!"

CHAPTER VIII

Leila Lightwood

June slipped into July, with misty mornings, long, hot, cloudless days, and golden twilights.

April, blissfully unconscious that Blossom still quivered with curiosity over her, and hung on Jeremy's scant fund of information, that Michael Brown more than once pondered over her coming to Blossom, his musings sometimes interrupted by silent laughter as he recalled the picture of her bright eyes peeping out from behind dangling trousers, that Chrissy and Rose excitedly argued over her, and that Miss Manny still had a "goneness at the pit of her stomick, just thinkin' what Blossom folks'd say if they knew what the girl was," felt more and more at home in Miss Manny's spic-and-span house and gradually forgot to watch for the word from Toto.

Just once Miss Manny had allowed April to tell her something of her story. She had sat, grim-faced, and listened, then she had silenced her abruptly.

"I've heard enough. I don't want to know nothin' 'bout those awful folks with legs and arms growin' together, and two heads and things. 'Taint likely any of 'em 'll come to Blossom, and if they ever do, well, you won't speak to them, there."

April, hurt at her unsympathetic tone, did not want to tell more. She would not expose to Miss Deborah's scorn her precious Marietta and Philomena Snow and Evalina Du Monte, who could do such beautiful things while she hung by her teeth from a ring, mid-air. Someday she would ask Michael Brown why Miss Manny thought them so wicked.

Though Miss Manny did not need to remind anyone in Blossom that a Manny was as good as a Meredith, or a Truitt, nevertheless she took keen delight in having the Meredith car stop frequently at her house, in having Miss Chrissy and Miss Rose sit on her porch with Aprilly. Too, she had her own reason for encouraging April's friendship with the young people at Forest Hill; so long as Aprilly devoted all her leisure time to the Merediths, her secret was safe. It was not likely, the good woman reasoned, that April was going to tell *them* that she came from a circus. No, indeedy! So she helped plan the picnics, the beach suppers at the Cove, the frequent trips in the *Mabel T.* When Keith rented a launch and with Cap'n Merry brought it down from Portland she did little more than lift her hands and with only an "invitin' death, *I* call it," she let April go out in it.

For the same reason that Miss Manny abetted April's intimacy with the Merediths, to the absorption of every moment of the long, lazy, tranquil sum-

mer days, she suddenly abandoned her determination that April should have "Sunday-schoolin'." For this she had much to answer to her stern Puritan conscience. She tried to make it up to April by daily readings from the Bible, which April enjoyed immensely, though she scandalized poor Miss Manny by asking all sorts of questions concerning what they read together. Miss Manny thought it wicked to call any portion of the Good Book a story—and as to asking questions about it! Then each Sunday April learned a hymn which, all through the week she sang joyously over the dishpan, while Miss Manny prayed inwardly that no terrible visitation might come to the house as a result of Aprilly's heathenish "goin's-on." Usually when "Gentle Saviour, Lead Me," floated in to her to the rattle of the pump handle she clapped her hands to her ears that she might not hear.

Silenced though she was before Miss Manny, with the Merediths poor April felt a growing longing to talk of herself. During the pleasant outings, the long walks on the Point, the bon-fire picnics in the Cove, Chrissy and Rose gave their girlish confidences generously. Chrissy's were far more enlivening than Rose's, though, to April, Rose's life seemed like one in a story-book. Her mother had died when she was a baby, her father had been lost at sea somewhere very far away. She could not remember either of them. Her uncle had placed her in a school outside

of Tarrytown, where the teachers wore gray robes and spoke in soft voices, where the children played in a beautiful walled garden and sang in a quaint old stone chapel with lovely stained windows. Rose had stayed there until she had learned all that the school could teach her, then she had gone to Oakdale with Chrissy and had become a member of her uncle's family. April liked to think of Rose as a little saint, kneeling in the glow of rainbow-stained windows such as she had seen, with Claribel, in great, beautiful cathedrals. April thought it horrid of Chrissy to call Rose "Prudy," but Chrissy could say many rude things that others could not because of her sprightly, animated way. Chrissy, at sixteen, was a magnetic young person who wore her clothes jauntily and made everyone think she was very clever and pretty. She labored to keep up a consistent snobbishness, befitting what she primly called her "position," though at times she found it very hard, for she possessed an instinctive good nature and a great curiosity concerning those whose lives touched her own.

When Chrissy talked of the girls at Oakdale, the vacations in the mountains, of Great-aunt Matilda who lived in Washington, and Cousin Theodore-this and Cousin Winifred-that, April longed to tell the girls of her beloved "family," of Queenie, and Toto, of Marky, slim and handsome in his tight-fitting scarlet clothes and shiny black boots, of Marietta,

beautiful as a French doll, of Philomena Snow. Chrissy and Rose chattered about their life at school, of the places they had been; April wanted, in turn, to tell them of the dusty suffocating tents, of the blare of music, of the great, breathless, applauding crowds, of the marvelous gymnasts, the jugglers, the tight-rope walkers, the sleek horses, the lumbering elephants, performing marvelous tricks, the brave Mlle. Citi and her trained lions, the endless traveling in special cars, the long walks in strange cities with Claribel, when Queenie would not let her go to the "show." April thought it unfair that she must lock her lips upon such wonderful confidences; that she could not tell these new friends that she too, had a "family."

April thought Chrissy bragged. That had been a pet accusation of little Marietta, who had often in April's presence, angrily declared that Evalina Du Monte "bragged," that Mlle. Citi "bragged." April had found these little jealous flare-ups in the pad-room most enlivening, and was always sorry when Toto, the family peacemaker, smoothed things over.

"Mother says she likes to have me know her friends real well, so that when I come out I'll have poise!"

Neither April not Rose—nor, indeed, Chrissy herself—knew just what "poise" meant, nevetheless Chrissy's superior manner drove April beyond en-

durance. The girls were stretched on the sand at the Cove. Although a pleasant breeze off the water tempered the heat of the afternoon, April looked very warm as she lifted her face from the lazy task of letting the white sand trickle through her fingers.

"My mother always wanted me to know her friends, too," she answered quickly.

There was a moment's silence. Chrissy's face wore an expression of interested expectancy. It was the first time April had mentioned her mother.

"My mother had ever so many friends," April went on. "They were awfully clever people, too."

"I adore clever people. Were they artists and musicians and actresses?" Chrissy's eyes were laughing.

"All kinds." April did not care much, now, what she said. Chrissy's fine superiority must be broken. "But her very best friend was an author—oh, the loveliest woman, all velvet like a pansy."

"What a darling way of describing a person," broke in Rose.

"Tell us more about her. What did she write? Books? Poetry? There was a man at school who wrote poetry. He came there to read from His Own Works. He had long hair and wore a funny jacket like a smock."

For a fraction of a moment April hesitated. She would have liked to tell the girls the true story. It

had been during those few months immediately after Queenie had left the "show," when they had lived in the big Boston hotel, that the "loveliest woman" had come into her life. Wandering about the wide corridors with Claribel she had first seen her sitting at a little desk in one of the adjoining parlors. The circle of soft glow from the small lamp at the desk had given her what April called the "pansy" look. April had whiled away many a lonely moment in watching other hotel guests and pretending that she knew them, sometimes other children, happy-faced, immaculately dressed, escorted about by trim nurse-maids who would not let them speak to anyone, sometimes very old gentlemen or pompous old ladies with huge hats and ermine. It was great fun to make believe that they said: "How do you do, my dear? Have you time to run up to my room and have a bon-bon—or a bit of chocolate marshmallow ice-cream, or see the new game I have, or the book or—" April had been overjoyed to learn from Claribel that the "pansy" lady was living at the hotel, and that she might pretend ever so much about her. Queenie wanted to stay in her room all the time and was quite willing that she and Claribel should go wherever they wished. Because, at the time, April felt vaguely that Queenie needed friends, she pretended that the "pansy" lady was her mother's dearest friend.

Then one day Claribel, who shared her secret play, came to her with the astonishing news, gleaned from the chambermaid on their floor, that the "pansy" lady was Miss Leila Lightwood, a great writer; Claribel could show April one of Miss Lightwood's books on the hotel newsstand that very minute.

When Queenie suddenly decided to leave the hotel April would have found the parting with her "pretend" friend very difficult to bear had not the "pansy" lady, meeting her in the corridor the very day of their departure, smiled at her and said: "Good-morning, brightness." That had given her something to remember.

But April knew that, though Rose might understand her "pretend" friends, Chrissy was certain to laugh. She turned her eyes away toward the blue level of the sea.

"She's Miss Leila Lightwood, and she writes—lots of books."

Chrissy gave a little scream. "Leila Lightwood? Leila Lightwood who wrote 'Bars'? Why she's my mother's cousin-by-marriage's daughter—sort of my cousin. How *funny!*"

A dull red crept slowly over April's face. She wished that a great wave might rush up and engulf her. She dared not face Chrissy and let her see her guilt.

"Where did you know her?" Chrissy demanded.

"We met her—in a hotel—in Boston." There was truth in that!

"Oh, it *must* be the same person. There can't be two people named Leila Lightwood who write books. And only this very morning mother received a letter from her saying that she was coming here in just a few days. She's ever so much fun—she never does anything like other people. But, of course, if you know her, you know that. Won't she be surprised to find you here, April?"

Poor April caught suspicion in Chrissy's tone. She muttered something to the effect that Miss Leila "would be surprised." Then she declared that it was getting "hotter and hotter" in the Cove, and that she wanted to go home. She was glad that it was only a step to the path to Forest Hill. As a tortured mouse must long to escape from its captor cat she longed to escape from Chrissy.

When they reached the path which led up to Forest Hill Chrissy turned back to say: "Day after day after tomorrow, April. And she'll be so surprised to find you here."

On the step at Forest Hill Chrissy plumped down with a disagreeable laugh.

"Well, I think April Dangerfield was telling a great big fib, about knowing Leila."

"Oh, Chrissy—"

"Did you see how queer she looked? Anyway, if Leila did know her and her mother, now we'll find out something about her. And if she didn't—"

Rose was troubled. She had noticed April's guilty expression; however loyalty urged her to April's defense.

"Chrissy, perhaps April has some secret trouble she can't tell us about. Lots of people often have. And their best friends ought to help them instead of teasing them. I'm never, never going to pry around to find out things about her. I like her just as she is."

Chrissy, vexed that Rose refused to share her suspicions of April, wanted to hurt her cousin and knew the surest way of doing so. She tilted her head contemptuously. "Oh, Rose, you're so simple! Anyone could fool you. I s'pose that's because you were brought up in that funny convent place and knew so few people. You don't know how careful one has to be about getting acquainted with nobodies. And then if they turn out to be *story-tellers!* Why, if mother wasn't so busy resting now I know what she'd have to say about our chumming around with April Dangerfield."

Rose, as near that moment to hating her cousin as her warm heart could come, tried desperately to frame a fitting retort to throw at Chrissy's departing back. Left alone she struggled with angry tears.

"I don't care if April fibbed or whom she knows or who she is—I like her and I'm going to be friends," she flung at the nodding roses.

CHAPTER IX

Sackcloth

"I'm blest if I know what's come over you, Aprilly."

Miss Deborah gave vent to the worry she had felt for three days. "If it ain't your liver then its your temper. Red hair like yours always has a temper you have to look out for. Milly Orcutt, up Portland way, had red hair, and she took fits, her temper got so bad."

April's eyes dropped before Miss Manny's searching gaze. It was far better for Miss Deborah to think that it might be her liver or even her temper than to know she had told a lie. She had heard Miss Manny express her opinion of one Joshua King whose word you could not take "if he stood on a stack of Bibles." Joshua, Miss Manny had made it plain, was akin to a person she spoke of as "old Harry himself," and close relation to circus folk.

For three days April had refused to stir from the house. From behind a half-closed blind she had watched her "pansy lady" arrive. First she had heard the whistle of the train; a little later, on the road outside, a horn had honked. Keith was driving. Chrissy, in the tonneau with Miss Lightwood, had

pointed to the house. April had caught a glimpse of a glowing, tanned face turned toward her hiding place. Her heart, under its weight of humiliation, had hurt her cruelly.

In her misery she could hear Chrissy telling Miss Lightwood of her silly fib. And there would be no one there to defend her, no one to say that she had been driven to it, that it wasn't a very big fib, anyway, for Miss Lightwood had, once, spoken to her and said: "Good-morning, brightness." But, oh, now she would never, never speak to her. Chrissy would see to it that Miss Lightwood would have nothing but contempt for her. And Rose and Keith would despise her, too.

"This Sloane's Herb Tonic won't hurt your liver a mite, and if it is temper 't won't hurt you either, and you've got to learn to fight *that* out by yourself," broke in Miss Manny across poor April's pain. And April, with equal resignation, accepted the great doses of dark, sticky, bitter liquid and the advice to "red-haired folks," both of which Miss Manny handed out with impartial faith.

"It ain't that she's exactly what you might call downright sick," Miss Manny explained to Michael Brown, whom she met at the Rectory gate, "it's that she don't smile once. And I don't know as you'd notice anyone else that don't smile but you do in Aprilly. And she don't run out into the yard anymore like she used to every other minute and sing."

But for her deep concern over April Miss Deborah might have been aghast at appealing to the new preacher. "Don't know why I out and told him the way I did," she did rebuke herself a moment later. "It's because he's so sympathizin' lookin' and more like a human than a preacher, I'd say."

Michael Brown had turned and, measuring his step with Miss Manny's had gone with her back to her house. They found April painstakingly darning a long black stocking. Over the bent head and averted face was an air of despondency. Not even her Mr. Nice-face could win a smile in greeting.

For awhile Michael Brown and Miss Manny talked of little things that were happening among the people in Blossom. Then Miss Deborah declared that she'd "clean forgotten that tick in the woodshed that she was goin' to fill," and hurried from the room with a meaning nod toward April. "If it's temper he'll find out if he's any kind of a preacher, and if it's liver, well, there ain't anything better'n my herb tonic," she soliliquized over the "tick."

April threw one wild look after Miss Manny. To tell Michael Brown that she had told a lie would be worse, even than to tell Miss Manny! So in constrained silence, she plied her needle furiously fast, with disasterous consequences to the poor stocking.

"Come, little pal, what's troubling you?"

Michael Brown's voice was vibrant with tenderness, for he suddenly realized the loneliness of the little soul before him, with only Deborah Manny's cramped understanding. It broke down April's defense. There was an interval of silence. Then: "I told a lie!" she cried, stormily, throwing the stocking into the basket. "It wasn't a lie that hurt anybody—only myself. Toto always said that lies hit you back every time and they're their own punishment. I don't think I ever told one before, even a little bit of a one. And I'll never, *never* tell another!"

Michael Brown put his hand under the girl's chin and lifted her burning face. Where she had dreaded to see sternness she saw only kindness.

"Well, I don't know that I can add anything to that," was his amazing, unbelievable answer.

"Oh, you're just like my Toto!" April cried "I thought—"

"Your Toto must be a very wise man. An untruth usually does deal its own punishment sometime or other. But you must not hide away from its consequences."

"You mean—" April looked frightened, "that I—I ought to just go and let Chrissy and the—the others—and Miss Lightwood—show how they despise me?"

Michael Brown smiled at her intenseness. "April, I don't know what you have said or done, and if you

do not want to tell me, you need not, but you must bear in mind that your Chrissy and Rose, and even Miss Lightwood, whom, by the way, I know well, and who is a charming person, will despise you more for moral cowardice than for an untruth confessed."

April stood rigid before her sentence. "All right," she muttered slowly. "I'll go there—if *you* say so!"

But the bitterness of April's cup was unexpectedly sweetened. Directly after the noonday meal, at a moment when April was alone in the house, a knock sounded at the door. April slowly wiped the dishwater from her hands and crossed to lift the latch. There on the threshold, clad in cool folds of blue-lavender, stood Miss Leila Lightwood.

In her confusion April gasped. Miss Lightwood smiled, the same quick warm smile that had made her "Good-morning, brightness," linger so long in April's memory.

"This is little April Dangerfield, isn't it?"

April, tongue-tied, managed to nod. Miss Lightwood held out her hand.

"It's quite the nicest surprise finding you here in Blossom. That is what I said when Chrissy told me. Won't you ask me in?" She did not wait for the invitation; with a pretty gesture she pushed her way past April into the living room. She turned her head to survey the room, then dropped into Miss

Manny's work chair. I've heard Cousin Caroline speak so often of old Cap'n Manny and his daughter. Miss Manny is out, isn't she? I met her near the Emporium. I knew that it was she by Cousin Caroline's description. Oh, these dear New England homes—you don't find anything like them anywhere else in the world. Now, my dear, come here and let me have a look at you. Don't be afraid of me, child! Rose says you call me the Pansy-lady, and I think that is the loveliest thing I have ever been called."

April crossed slowly to Miss Lightwood's side. Miss Lightwood pulled up a chair, indicating to April to sit in it; at the same time she caught April's hand and patted it.

"Chrissy told me you were staying with Miss Manny as a—a sort of companion. Are you 'on your own' now, as they say?"

April nodded. What if Miss Lightwood should ask her more questions? And how much had Chrissy told? But Miss Lightwood's smiling countenance betrayed nothing, nor did she press April further.

She chuckled softly. "Chrissy seemed a little—well, put out, because you and I—were old friends!"

Now April stared. Was she losing her senses? Had some magic made her pretense come true?

"But we're *not*," she cried bluntly. "At least—*you* didn't know—*me!*"

"Ah, but I did! And that is why I am especially delighted to find you here. Oh, April child, I don't measure my friendships like other people. I have never exchanged a word with some of my best friends. I know them only through experiences we have shared or words they have written or harmonies we have enjoyed together. They're my spirit friends. And I am always seeking them, everywhere. One day I saw you. I liked you. I watched you wander around the hotel with your nurse or governess or whatever she was. I pretended things about you. I thought you must be very lonely and find the days long and dull; I wished you were running about and playing with other girls, going to school and having fun. I'll tell you a secret—I paid my chambermaid a whole dollar when she found out for me that your name was April! The fairies must have named you. I had called you Little White Birch, but April is really much better. And then, suddenly, you disappeared. I was so sorry. I missed you. But I do not forget my spirit friends, no, indeed. And now we've found one another in Blossom."

"Why—why—oh, Miss Lightwood, *I* was pretending—I knew *you!* And Claribel found out for me who you were. Then I am a—spirit friend?"

Miss Lightwood laughed at the incredulous look in April's face.

"You are, and you're going to be a dear real friend, too—a little playmate. I'm very young inside, you know. We shall have jolly times together. I'm certain I am going to love this quaint place. I'm planning to stay here the rest of the summer. Won't you walk back with me, now, to Forest Hill?"

April's brows drew sharply together. She remembered Chrissy—and Michael Brown—and what he had said.

"I—I told Chrissy that you were a—a friend of my mother's. She bragged so, she just—" But April broke off; to blame Chrissy for her own shortcomings was not the moral courage Michael Brown would want. "I told a lie. I've got to tell her and Rose that I—"

"Oh *April!*" cried Miss Lightwood, with tragic appeal. "That'll give away our secret! I don't tell anyone like Chrissy—or even Cousin Caroline—about my spirit-friends. They simply couldn't understand—they're that kind."

April frowned. "But I must. Michael Brown—I mean the Mr. Reverend Michael Brown told me I had to—"

Miss Lightwood burst into a peal of laughter. "Micky Brown? Oh, dearie me, I used to dance with him in dancing school—and play tennis. I beat him

once, too. And here he is now, spreading the sackcloth for a sinner like me!"

"Oh, not you, Miss Lightwood, just me."

Miss Lightwood sprang up and caught April's hand. "All right, little lady, we'll go together and you may confess anything you want to. But wait until I see Michael Brown! And I'm very eager to see him, I'm very, very fond of him. There aren't many like him. Can we run right along or is there something you must do?"

It took only a moment to whisk the last of the dinner dishes away, then April slipped off her apron, caught up a sun hat and declared she was ready. With Miss Lightwood beside her she could face anything!

To her surprise it was not at all difficult to acknowledge to Chrissy her silly fib. And Miss Lightwood hastened to follow her awkward confession with an explanation to them all—even Mrs. Meredith was sitting on the porch with the girls—of how, across the "crowded loneliness of the Copley-Plaza their two spirits had met in a wordless but none the less friendly communion." Not one of them understood and, over Chrissy's head, Miss Lightwood winked at April in a meaning way. That wink warmed April's heart through and through; with this delightful bond between Miss Lightwood and herself why need she care because she could not

tell Chrissy and Rose and Keith of the "family" which had once been hers?

Michael Brown had been right. The girls would have despised her if she had been afraid to face them. April, who had never before had to confront a moral issue, thrilled over her discovery. She felt a friendlier note in Chrissy's voice. Rose reproached her volubly for having stayed away from Forest Hill so long, thereby missing an excursion to Pullett's Bay.

"But Keith says Old Cap'n Joe will take us in the *Mabel T.* to Pigeon Island. There's a cave there and some ruins. And we'll take our lunch and stay all day. Will Miss Manny let you go, April?"

CHAPTER X

Gullfaxi

Miss Manny let April go to Pigeon Island and on many other jolly outings. Though, all her life, she had rigidly maintained that "all play and no work makes a body worth next to nothin'," she now displayed a surprising inclination to indulge April in as much play as she wanted. Perhaps it was because April's "wild" ways, as she called them—drove her "nigh to distractin'."

"Anyways it costs less to have her out of the house," she admitted to an inquisitive neighbor, "what with her teasin' to bake pies and then forgettin' them in the oven 'cause she heard a thrush! Never heard one before. Beats me what she sees when she's starin' up in the trees. Downright makes me creepy. But she's smart as a whip," Miss Deborah hastened to add, when she saw the neighbor's lips part as though to frame a word of sympathy. "And I don't know what I'd do without her."

So the summer passed, for April, happily; she found in her new life delights she had never known, even in the days when poor Queenie had reigned supreme in her world of canvas and sawdust. The old

Manny homestead, built a hundred years ago, was to April, who had never known a real home, a veritable palace; its quaint furnishings and its treasures, brought by seafaring Mannys of past generations, were to her more precious than the priceless treasures of the finest palace. And April loved Miss Manny the more for her many eccentricities. Had she not grown up with eccentric people?

She was accepted by Chrissy and Rose, now, unreservedly. Chrissy even forgot to laugh at her made-over clothes. From Miss Leila the girls learned little more than that April had lost her mother and had to support herself. They no longer wondered over what she had been or why she never spoke of anything that had happened before she came to Blossom. It was enough for them that she was invariably a jolly comrade, ready for any adventure, brimful of initiative and daring, always in high spirits. Her reticence only added the charm of mystery to her many other charms.

To April's regret Miss Lightwood divided her time between the young people and her cousin Caroline. Sometimes, when she stayed behind and from the porch waved the girls and Keith off for a picnic or a cruise, April knew she read longing in her face. April thought Mrs. Meredith very tiresome with her everlasting headaches and "nerves." Queenie, even when she had been very sick, had never been fretful

and peevish like Mrs. Meredith. April wondered how Miss Lightwood could be so patient and content to stay behind and listen to Mrs. Meredith's whinings when there were such jolly things to do out-of-doors.

"Just think, in two more weeks we'll go back to Oakdale. Who ever would have dreamed that the summer could have gone so quickly," exclaimed Chrissy, as she and Rose, one golden morning, walked down the path which led from Forest Hill to the Cove.

"It's been a wonderful summer," echoed Rose, enthusiastically. "I shall miss the ocean when we go back to school."

"You goose! As though you'd have time there at Oakdale to miss anything. There's going to be a new French teacher this year. *That* means fun. You can always rag a new teacher."

Rose wanted very much to voice a protest at such a thought, but she had not the courage. She knew that Chrissy would laugh at her and call her "Prudy." But at the quiet little school where she had lived her childhood not one of the pupils would have wanted to rag a teacher.

Chrissy, unconscious of what was in Rose's mind, went on: "We just ragged Fraulein Frank out of the school. She was a sniffly sort, anyway, and was always running to the Dowager and telling tales. She had our floor. One night we gave her a ghost

party. We all met in Dot Myers' room with sheets around us and pillow cases over our heads, and then we hid behind things. We giggled just as loud as we could and, sure enough, in a moment, pit-a-pat, came Fraulein down the hall. Then Dot switched off the lights. Just as Fraulein opened the door we all jumped out at her with the awfulest spooky screeches, and Floss West rattled some castanets so's to sound like bones. Well, *say—"* Chrissy had to pause for laughter, "we finished Fraulein *that* night. She had hysterics and they had to call the nurse, and after that she refused to sleep anywhere but in the little alcove next to the Dowager's room. And the next term she resigned."

"But didn't they do anything to you girls?" asked Rose, breathlessly.

"By the time the Dowager came up there wasn't a soul in Dot's room, and they found Dot sound asleep in Cally Sandrock's room, where she'd gone to spend the night because Cally was homesick. She had her sheet on still, but the Dowager's near-sighted and she thought it was her nightie. No one could find out who the ghosts were 'cause no one would tell. The Dowager kept us in all day Saturday, but it rained, so no one cared, and I had a spiffy book, anyway."

"I'd have been dreadfully frightened," admitted Rose. "I'd hate to be punished."

Chrissy smiled loftily. "Oh, when you're caught you have to put up a good front—act as though you didn't care. The girls think more of you, anyway, after you've been called down before the Dowager. Of course you can be a grind, but no one thinks much of *them*. They just dig and dig and don't have any fun."

"But they learn more, don't they?" ventured Rose, with sudden courage. "And Jane Starr was president of her class last year and the high honor pupil—and she played basketball and hockey."

"Oh, well, some of them—" But, at that moment, Keith hailed them.

"Where's April? Cap'n Joe says, if we can start soon, he'll take us over to Gull Light!"

School and the approaching school days were promptly forgotten. Rose rushed away to get April while Chrissy turned back to Forest Hill to tell her mother where they were going, and to coax a lunch from the formidable Higgins who held sway in the kitchen.

In half an hour the young people were sailing off with Cap'n Joe. Over them stretched a cloudless sky, a sapphire sea danced about them, slapping saucily at the sides of the boat.

"Say, it's good to be alive when it's like this—*and* vacation!" Like the girls Keith had been thinking of college, which he would enter, in two weeks,

as a freshman. "Anyone who whispers school today's going to be thrown overboard." The three girls echoed his threat—even April, for deep in her heart she dreaded, with something like terror, the "schoolin'" which awaited her in the dingy brick schoolhouse near the Common.

Gull Light, a range light built on one of the many islands which fringed the coast, was a new spot of adventure for the young people. Cap'n Joe knew the lightkeeper, and a word from him gave the youngsters the freedom of the island. They spread their lunch on some lofty rocks facing the sea and ate it to the last crumb. Then they joined the two old mariners in the little whitewashed cottage next to the light and listened while the two matched yarns.

Keith suggested that, on the homeward trip, they beach at the lower point and cut home across the fields, as Cap'n Joe had to run down to Kennebunk for a supply of oil. To this the girls agreed. The lower point lay half a mile beyond Blossom; a tramp through the sweet-smelling fields would be a pleasant finish to the day's fun.

"I think this picnic's been the best of all," declared April, with a tiny sigh, because back in her head was the thought that perhaps it was the last picnic of the summer. "Oh, I don't know what I'm going to do without you girls and Miss Leila!"

"You might shed a tear for me, too, April," laughed Keith.

"Oh, Keith, I always think of you as one of the girls," whereupon Keith threatened her with the picnic basket and hotly pursued her as she fled through the field and vaulted the fence into Lymus Lee's pasture.

"Call me a sissy, eh? Take it back! *Take it back!*" Keith commanded, holding tight to April's wrist, which he had captured.

"Take back *nothing!*" April dared, tossing her disheveled red head. But a shrill scream from Chrissy stayed Keith's punishment.

"Look! *Look!* What *is* it? Oh, Keith—" and Chrissy, really frightened, pointed her finger toward a corner of the pasture where a horse was quietly grazing. At the same time she sought the protection of Keith's back.

"You silly, that's a horse!"

"Why, it's the biggest horse I ever *saw!*" cried Chrissy. "It's a—a monster. A mastodon."

The horse, hearing voices, had lifted his head. He was big and the more startling because his body was snow white with a coal black head.

"Isn't he *funny?*" screamed Rose, safe behind Keith, too. "He looks as though he was wearing another horse's head."

"Or'd put his head in a tub of ink," laughed Chrissy.

April stood a little apart from the others, staring. Where had she seen a horse like that before? Suddenly, with a sharp contraction of the heart, she remembered Queenie, riding around and around in the ring on a snow-white steed with black markings, while she, at Claribel's side, watched in rapt admiration.

"Oh—" she breathed, softly.

"I know," cried Keith. "That's Deacon Lee's circus horse. I heard him down at the Post Office the other night bragging because, at a sale down in Boston, he'd found a broken down old nag that'd been in a circus and he'd bought it dirt cheap. Say, he's a grand horse." Keith whistled. "He won't hurt you, 'fraidy-cat," skilfully dodging the hand Chrissy flung out to hold him.

"Broken down old nag!" April's face flushed as she walked across the pasture toward the horse. The horse, doubtless hopeful of a friendly lump of sugar, was advancing slowly to meet her. Chrissy and Rose, with little squeals of alarm, hung back.

"Gullfaxi! *Gullfaxi!"* whispered April. The horse laid his velvety nose in her hand and sniffed. "Can't you tell me if you're Gullfaxi? *Can't* you just nod or—or something?" implored April.

But the horse, disappointed, merely lifted his black head and eyed her sorrowfully. Whereupon April, with a convulsive movement, buried her face in his thick mane. Keith, at her side, watched her in amazement.

"I thought—maybe—it was—" The girl stopped abruptly.

"Do you like horses, April? I do—I'm crazy about 'em. I'll bet this poor old fellow hates like everything to pull old man Lee's truck. He's seen better days, all right. What are you going to do?"

April's face glowed with sudden inspiration. She was tearing as her sneakers and stockings.

"I'll show you!" she laughed. Then, barefooted, she swung herself to the horse's back. Scarcely had she caught the heavy mane when the animal broke into an easy canter around and around the pasture. While Keith and Chrissy and Rose stood, breathless, admiring, fearful, April pirouetted on the horse's back, first on the toes of one foot, then of another; with airy gestures she threw kisses to right and left and smiled at an imaginary audience. Finally, with a tinkling laugh, she turned a complete somersault!

"Hurray! Hurray!" chorused the spectators. And the horse tossed his black head in the air as much as to say he had come again into his own.

"Where did you ever learn to do all that?" de-

manded Chrissy and Rose, in one voice, when April, quite out of breath, jumped off from the horse and joined them.

"I—I—oh, Marky taught me. He was—a friend I knew—once." To avoid further questioning April turned to the horse and threw both arms around the huge neck. "You're a darling. Oh, I *know* you're Gullfaxi. For you've got to be. I love you!" she whispered into the shaggy mane. "No other horse could be as beautiful as you are."

"I wish *I* could do a stunt like that," mourned Chrissy, still staring, round-eyed, at April. "Wouldn't it make a hit at school?" She regarded April with new respect. "If I were you, April Dangerfield, I'd go on the stage—or in a circus. I wouldn't waste my time around that ridiculous crab of a Deborah Manny."

April's flushed face suddenly dimpled. "Miss Manny's nice even if she is—cross. But if we don't hurry home she'll be fixing a funeral wreath for me. Oh, I'm *so* happy! Didn't I say this was the nicest picnic? Keith, I'll race you to the end of the field if you'll just wait until I say good-by to Gullfaxi."

"To whom?"

"That's what I shall call this horse. I knew one, once, that was a lot like him and his name was Gullfaxi. I shall bring Gullfaxi a lump of sugar every single day."

"You *do* love horses, April!"

April, on tiptoe, was whispering into the horse's ear. No one could hear her nor see the tears she blinked from her eyes. "Good-by, dear old Gullfaxi, even if they do make you pull a horrid old truck April's near you and she'll take care of you."

The youngsters, wearied a little from the excitement of the performance in the pasture, slowly sauntered on homeward through the deep grass of the fields. April, after her race with Keith, grew very quiet, but in her eyes glowed a contented happiness. She had found an old, old friend. Like herself, he had been left behind—forgotten. But, oh, someday, *someday,* when at last Toto came, she would ask him if they might take Gullfaxi back with them to the ring. Broken down old nag, indeed! If it *was* Gullfaxi.

CHAPTER XI

The Fair

"I'll tell anyone I've a plan that's a corker! You'll get all the credit, Josh, too, and it'll make this county wake up to the fact that Blossom's some burg."

Keith and Josh Markham were lounging in Keith's motor boat. They had been tinkering with the engine, which, to Mrs. Meredith's relief, refused to run. Josh was one of the youths of Blossom "with whom," to use Chrissy's words, "Keith stooped to run around." He was two years older than Keith, he had long since finished his schooling and now worked, afternoons and evenings, in the Emporium. With his face and throat burned to a copper red, his tousled fair hair always fringing his ears, he was a comical contrast to the well-groomed Keith, but where Keith's face invariably wore an indolently happy and care-free expression, Josh Markham's was keen and serious. And, at the moment, his spirit was weighted with a heavy sense of responsibility. In a week the County Fair would come off and he was chairman of the program for Field Day.

For everyone, miles around, the County Fair was quite the most important event of the year. Old ladies and young ladies spent the long winter months

preparing jellies and preserves and embroideries to be exhibited, while their menfolk looked to the live stock, with many a dream of bringing home a blue ribbon to adorn a box stall. And the Home Field Day was the best day of the week. The morning was given over to races of all sorts, with prizes for the fleet of foot and quick of hand; in the afternoon there was always a varied program made up of the talent of the towns of the county. The last year the eighth grade of the Baytown school had taken the laurels with a Dance of the Fairies. "Fairies," Josh Markham had snorted, at the same time racking his brain to think what Blossom could do, this year, to make the poor little Baytown fairies look like "thirty cents."

It had happened that, in one of what Keith modestly styled his "rare moments of profundity" a plan had popped, full-grown, into his head. It was with the sole desire of quickly imparting this plan to Josh —so that no time might be lost—that he had invited Josh to "take a look at his darned old 'bus." His plan had grown out of the incident in Lymus Lee's pasture. April's performance had greatly excited the girls and Keith. For the girls it added to April's mysterious charms. More than once they had remarked on April's ease of manner at all times; not even the impressive Higgins had awed her. Now added to this was this rare accomplishment. They

secretly visioned for her a thrilling future far from Blossom and Deborah Manny and very close to the world of moving pictures. But Keith wanted to bring her talent to more immediate use.

"It'll be as easy as anything," he finished. "I'll ask Lymus Lee for his horse and Chrissy and Rose'll help fix up the nag to look like something, and you see if it doesn't put Blossom on the map. They've never had anything like it, believe me!"

"But will April do it?" asked Josh.

"Oh, I can get her," promised Keith, loftily.

And Keith did. He knew just how to put his appeal. "Think what it'll mean to that old horse to get into the ring again. Prob'bly make him think old times've come back. And I'll stand in the center and crack a whip. Oh, *boy,* won't the hicks sit up and take notice?"

April did not hear the last of Keith's words. "What it'll mean to that old horse," rang in her ears. Since the day in the pasture she had gone about with such a radiance of spirit that a person, given greater powers of intuition than Deborah Manny possessed, might have guessed that she carried in her heart a joyous secret. She had found an old friend—even if it was only a horse who could not tell her that he was Gullfaxi—a friend who belonged to that bright and happy past, before Queenie's illness. And the secret meant more to her because the silence imposed upon

her by Miss Manny had seemed to shut those happy childhood days quite away from her.

"I'll do it," she cried impulsively.

Only once did it occur to April that she ought to take Miss Manny into her confidence; that was when she stole to the attic and opened the old trunk into which the despised "circus fixin's" had been thrown. But Keith had said it must all be kept a great secret. Afterwards she would explain that to Miss Manny if Miss Manny, for any reason, was cross about it.

When the eventful afternoon of the Field Day arrived thousands thronged the fair-ground and jammed into the grandstand, for over the county had spread the rumor that young Meredith and Josh Markham had a "surprise." Miss Manny sat primly in the third row, bowing to her neighbors with a new dignity born of having carried off the honorable mention with her gooseberry preserve; the Sneeds sat in the front row; Phoebe King, surrounded by young people, sullenly watched from a back row. She secretly cherished a fancy for Josh Markham and suffered furious jealousy because Josh had not featured her on his program.

At the end of his program, Josh, resplendent in the Meredith's chauffeur's clothes, a long whip in his hand, came into the field before the grandstand, and, in stentorian tones, announced that the "famous Mlle. Jacqueline on her horse Gullfaxi," would next

appear. In the stable Keith, a little sore that Josh had appropriated his desired job, gave an encouraging flip to Gullfaxi's panoplied flank, and out into the ring danced April.

Something of that thrill which had stirred La Belle Queen in those happy days when she had heard the thunder of applause above the blare of the music, swept April now. She saw only a blur of fantastic faces, the blue of the sky arching overhead; she heard only the din of the band imported from Portland. In her frilly, knee-length pink skirts, bare-armed, bare-kneed, her red hair crowned by a tinsel wreath, she made a picture which would linger long in more than one mind. Inspired by the applause, she rode with a grace that surpassed even Queenie's; she leaped and pirouetted, flung kisses to right and left, and, while the spectators leaned forward in breathless expectancy, she accomplished the famous somersault which, long ago, Marky had taught her. It was not until she had circled the ring for the third time that the Blossom folk recognized her. As she cantered from the field the loud applause gave way, slowly, to a silence fraught with astonishment and disapproval.

"Gee, April, you're the goods," cried Keith, reaching up to help her from the horse. And April, flushed with the excitement of the feat, slipped down into his arms. In an instant, with a laugh, she shook herself free. Outside the band had struck up "Good-night, ladies," with cheerful indifference to the glow-

ing afternoon sun. In the dusty shed that served for a stable Keith and April—and Gullfaxi—were alone.

"Did I do it all right? I'd have hated to have made a failure when you planned it. And, *oh,* it was fun!"

With a slight motion Keith detained her. He talked fast—in a moment the girls would join them. "Say, April, I'm going away tomorrow. Got to go a day earlier to take that French make-up. I hate to go. Going to miss you a lot, April, honest. You're such fun, you're not a bit Chrissy's sort. A fellow gets aw'fly tired of that kind, you know—they're so silly, but *you're*—different." In Keith's tone there was an awkward tenderness, an evident desire to convey to April that, no matter what she had been or where she had come from, he, Keith Meredith, thought a great deal of her.

An added brightness glowed in April's face. It was nice in Keith to be so friendly. She felt a great desire to tell him about Toto and Queenie and the circus; she knew he would not think them so dreadful! But there was, and always would be, her promise to Miss Manny. She closed her lips regretfully on the impulse. Instead she put her hand in Keith's and gave his a little squeeze.

"I hate to have you go away, too, Keith. I hope you have all kinds of luck. And I'm glad—you like me. And, oh, Keith, do you s'pose Gullfaxi is as happy as I am?"

CHAPTER XII

Paying the Piper.

It seemed to Deborah Manny, as she made her escape from the Fair-ground, that a thousand eyes mocked her; the air quivered with accusing whispers; fingers of scorn pointed at her from above and below and roundabout. The poor woman fled without her certificate of honorable mention which for two generations had been given to the Manny gooseberry preserve.

Her flight was not so rapid, however, as to let her escape several of her neighbors who conveyed to her, with scarcely more than a word and a glance, that they considered it an outrage that she, Deborah Manny, should have kept such a girl in the village.

"And not told a soul she *was* that kind," was the aggrieved complaint.

Deborah turned her guilty head as she passed the Baptist church, then ran straight into Jeremy. Jeremy's face was wreathed in a triumphant grin.

"Pretty smart comp'ny, that gal o' yours, Debory," he called out, to which Deborah only answered with a meaning grunt.

April had flaunted her "circus ways" before her and before all Blossom! Well, a Manny knew her

duty. Those ancestors, who had doubtless been turning and turning in their graves near St. Stephen's (if there is any truth in the old saying), would see that she, Deborah Manny, could do what was right as well as the next one.

An hour later April, still a-thrill with her little triumph, danced down the street toward home. Under her arm she carried a bundle which contained the pink skirt. She sang, with a lilting swing, the hymn she had learned the Sunday before. Her world was very bright and happy!

But the Manny house wore such a strangely deserted air that April stopped short in wonder. What had happened? Every blind was tightly closed. The door was closed. There was not a sign of life about the place—as though suddenly everything within and about the house had died!

April stared, then advanced slowly, her attention held by a strange object on the porch—not strange, either, for it was the old leather bag with which she had escaped from No. 80 Fleming Street.

Kneeling on the step April slowly laid her hand upon the bag. It was packed. To its worn handle had been fastened an envelope. With trembling fingers the girl tore it open. From it dropped a five-dollar bank note.

The glow ebbed from April's heart, leaving her icy cold. She let the bank note flutter, unnoticed, to

the ground while she spread out the sheet of paper. Only a few lines were written upon it; more significant, more terrible than were the tightly closed blinds, the locked door.

"I don't need any circus-girl for company or anything else any longer when you don't keep your promise," was all that Miss Manny had written.

April stared, dry-eyed, first at the letter, then at the closed door. She had not meant to break her promise! She had not dreamed that her little performance would mean that to Miss Manny! If only Miss Manny would listen, would let her explain. For an instant she was moved to knock on the door, to beg to go in! Only for an instant, however, then pride came to her rescue. Never, never, *never* would she ask to enter that door! She had done no wrong, Miss Manny was not fair!

In her moment of bewilderment and dismay April thought not of Chrissy, who had declared her wonderful, or even Miss Lightwood—but of Michael Brown. Picking up the old bag she walked to the gate, turned into the road and made her way slowly, miserably, to the Rectory.

Overhead birds winged gayly in the arching treetops, the air was fragrant with the sweetness of ripening things, life, in its beauty, throbbed everywhere, yet in the heart of April had been killed a precious thing—a trust, a faith in human kindness.

The long windows of the Rectory study were open, and through one of them April entered, dragging her bag behind her. As her shadow fell across Michael Brown's desk, where he sat writing, he lifted his head quickly.

"How you startled me! Witch! Am I always to have you come upon me in some nerve-racking manner?" Then he caught the desolation of the girl's face, noticed the bag. "Why—what has happened, child?"

A dread caught at April's heart and made speech impossible. What if Michael Brown should think as Miss Manny had? What if *he* should turn her away because she had ridden Gullfaxi?

Rising, Michael Brown crossed the room, seized April's two hands and drew her to a chair.

"Little girl! Little girl! We're friends, aren't we? And what are friends for if they are not to help one another! Now, out with it! What is the meaning of all this? What has happened?"

Two bright spots of color flamed in April's cheeks. "I—I—can't tell you all, 'cause I promised Miss Manny! She says I broke my promise when I rode Gullfaxi at the Fair. But I didn't. At least I didn't mean to! And—and—when I went home—the —the door was locked—and she said—she wrote—she didn't want me any more. I had to go—somewhere—so I came here."

Michael Brown's heavy brows drew sharply together. He gave vent to a queer sound, then, jumping suddenly to his feet, he paced back and forth across the room. As suddenly he paused and confronted April.

"Turned you out? Didn't give you a chance to say a word? I heard of Keith's plan—good gracious, what did Miss Manny find wrong in that! I call this outrageous."

"Well, you see—" Poor, bewildered April wanted to be fair, "she made me promise—when she let me stay—that— She says it's wicked to—to do things —like that—like I did. Oh, I guess I'd better go away, because you'll never understand and I can't tell you!"

The woeful voice stirred Michael Brown deeply. He put his hand under April's chin and lifted her quivering face.

"No, child, you shall not go away. I have always known that you had some secret locked away in your heart. Someday, perhaps, you can tell me. Until then I shall take you on trust. I don't think you're wicked. I think you're a sunny-hearted, impulsive little creature. And you've been knocked rather cruelly and need right now more than anything else, a whole lot of kindness."

April's eyes, like twin stars, searched Michael Brown's face with intense eagerness.

"And I may stay? And you won't think Queenie and Toto wicked, either?"

"If you love them, April, I know they are not wicked. Put these bitter thoughts out of your head. Tell me just this, child, is there not anyone really belonging to you to whom you can go?"

April shook her head. "Not exactly—belonging. When my mother died—I sent word to Toto—that's Toto Conge, but—but he hasn't —answered—yet. But, oh, I know he *will* sometime." She drew a long, tremulous sigh. "Oh, I was so frightened. But if I may stay here I will be ever so good and I'll try to help—"

Michael Brown reached for the old bag. "Come, let's see how thick the dust is in the spare room."

It was a very big room and very stuffy; the huge four-poster bed could have swallowed three little girls such as April—but to poor April it was a beautiful haven. As her eyes swept its dust and disorder her mind leaped ahead to all that she would do to make Michael Brown's house clean and sweet like Miss Manny's!

But, alas, that very resolve was to be her undoing.

During the days which followed poor Michael Brown found that it was not a simple matter to give refuge to a homeless little girl who could perform marvelous feats bareback. He was not blind to the disapproving glances cast in his direction nor to the

buzz of whispering which followed him wherever he went. He guessed, rightly, that all Blossom was agog over what had happened. Therefore he was somewhat prepared for the visit, a few days later, from two of his vestrymen.

Darius Camp, who, because of his age and prominence in the village, acted as spokesman, with much clearing of his throat and more hesitation than was usual with him, intimated to Michael Brown that the vestrymen of St. Stephen's and the deacons of the Baptist Church felt it urgent that "this Dangerfield girl" be sent away from Blossom!

"Everybody in the hull County knows what she done at the Fair! And not a one of us knows who she is! Debory Manny did just right! * * * We can't have our young folks hurt * * *"

Michael Brown, standing straight and tall before his visitors, his face carefully averted that they might not see its black look before he managed to control it, had a sudden picture of "the Dangerfield girl" as he found her, half an hour before—curled in a deep arm-chair, sound asleep, an old volume of Pilgrim's Progress across her lap, one hand on the open page, her head bent against the wing of the chair.

"Gentlemen!" Michael Brown broke in so suddenly that his callers stared, open-mouthed, "It's only a waste of your time—and Deacon Lee's—to

say another word! I refuse to send the girl away—at least until I have found a proper place for her to go. Why, you wouldn't turn a dog out the way Deborah Manny dismissed this child! What would have become of her—where could she have gone? You men have hearts—you, Camp, have a girl of your own, tell me this, could I have faced you all, as your spiritual leader if I had so failed in God's Charity and Love as to have sent her away from my door? I say *not*—" he stopped abruptly, a fury at the injustice of prejudice choking his thoughts. "I promise you that the young people of Blossom will not be hurt in any way! I must ask you to have confidence in me." His voice dropped to an appealing note—to defy his own congregation would not help poor little April.

Afterward Darius Camp admitted to his colleague that he "had a sight more respect for the young minister for standin' up to them! Guess if it'd been my Susie I'd wanted someone to give her a helpin' hand 'stead of a knock or a kick. The world's a pretty hard place, and lots of men are hard, too—I don't mind bein' the one to tell Deacon Lee * * *"

"Debory Manny had no business bringin' her here first place," the other agreed. "Only—what'll ever the minister do with her?"

The same question tormented Michael Brown when upon the heels of the vestrymen came Mrs.

Prowett, garbed in her best black silk dress and bonnet to "give notice."

"I've kept house for three ministers and I've served the Lord the best way I know how, but He or nobody else'd want me to put up with all I've put up with, these three days, when I don't *have* to, for Silas Prowett's aunt at Portland's wanted me to go there to live with her for five years, only duty's duty and I've stayed here—"

"But what's wrong?" begged Michael Brown.

"Wrong? That girl! She's a cleanin', cleanin', cleanin', every which way and all over and upsettin' things and talkin' 'bout making things *ship-shape.* She learned *that* talk over at Debory Manny's. I've known this long while that Debory Manny's jealous of me and saying this and that about me being a poor housekeeper! That's 'cause she's a Baptist. I admit I never was as fanaticy 'bout dust as she is, but you can always *find* things, and that's more than you'll do if this girl goes 'long—"

Michael Brown wisely controlled a desire to laugh; Mrs. Prowett in her best black and her indignation was a very threatening person!

"Won't you sit down and talk this over?" he asked, in a conciliatory tone.

"No, beggin' your pardon, sir, I *won't* sit down. And more'n *that*—" she had caught the gleam in his eyes, "*you* may think this is a funny matter, but *I* say

right now you choose between that piece and me! If *she* stays *I* go to Portland."

"But what shall I do with her?"

Mrs. Prowett's expression said, just as Deacon Lee and others had said: "Run her out of town." However, her lips closed on the words.

"*That's* Debory Manny's business. She brought her here. Let her clean someone else's house if she's so bent on the idee! Only, if—she—stays—"

There was no doubt but that Mrs. Prowett meant it—her black dress spoke volumes. Michael Brown's face wrinkled into countless creases. He could not —just now—lose Mrs. Prowett, tiresome, cranky, shiftless though she was!

Not until he had promised her to send April away, somewhere, the next day did she soften! Then she left him to his perplexing thoughts. What could he do with the child?

Far into the night he paced the garden path, puffing on his pipe and pondering over the little he could guess concerning April's past life and all that he knew of her since her coming to Blossom. The velvety blackness of the night, its mute sounds, weirdly affected his fancy—he felt that he stood alone with the fate of a human being in his hand—his action to make or destroy a little soul. Deep in his heart remained the conviction that April's life, almost up to her coming to Blossom had been curi-

ously sheltered. What turn of the Wheel of Destiny had thrown her friendless, upon a hard world? Where were the Toto and Queenie of whom she spoke so fondly? Why had Miss Manny extorted a promise of silence from the child? Ought he to go to Miss Manny and try to persuade her—oh, no, no—

Suddenly into his disturbed reflections flashed the thought of Leila Lightwood.

"Just the one! She'll fix everything," he said aloud. Then, his load of worry lifted, he gave a prodigious yawn and discovered that he was very, very sleepy.

CHAPTER XIII

Windover

Directly after a hasty breakfast, Michael Brown went in search of Leila Lightwood. He found her, not at Forest Hill, but at the Windover cottage, which she excitedly explained to him, she had leased for the winter. A fancy, seizing her "between midnight and morn," had led her to take this step in spite of the horror of Cousin Caroline and even Cap'n Joe Merry, the owner.

"You see the cottage is haunted," she added. In her linen smock, much rumpled by her morning's work, she looked like an eager young girl. "But all my life I've wanted to live in a haunted house. Cap'n Joe, bless his honest old soul, thought he ought to tell me that, sometimes when the wind blows, Ephraim Blossom and his bride whisper by the fireside. Why shouldn't they? I love the dear old cottage all the more because their loving spirits brood over it! I'll tell you the real reason, though. I'm trying to finish a manuscript—I haven't done a blessed thing at Forest Hill and I can't bear to go back to the city. Funny about a city, isn't it? You can always feel its fingers grip and hold you. But here at Windover I'm mistress of my soul. And

I've spent the summer steeped in such demoralizing luxury that I need cold rooms and sharp winds to whip me back into condition. But, a thousand pardons, Micky! I'm chattering on without letting you tell me why you 've honored me with a call at this hour of the morning."

In a few words Michael Brown told her of his perplexing situation. Miss Lightwood had heard that April had gone to the Rectory.

"It is like you, Micky, to take the child in and then stand by your guns with those old fogies. Oh, don't beetle your brows—I shall call them fogies, stupid, smug, too. So is Deborah Manny with her priggish littleness! But Mrs. Prowett—you can't have a row with her just now. That poor youngster, she must come to me, here at Windover."

"I knew you'd say that," cried the young man. "If you'll keep her for a while, anyway until we can plan what is best to do for her. We'll have to take her on trust, too, because Miss Manny has made her give some sort of a promise that she will not tell anything about herself. I'll not believe that Miss Manny knows anything very bad about April—she's impulsive and as changeable as her name, but she's a mighty wholesome little kiddie—more so than most of them—"

"And," added Miss Leila, laughing at his awkward effort to ex ress himself, "she has a charm of her own which goes way ahead of the very modern

and affected mannerisms of my own cousin Chrissy Meredith. And I'll add, too, that April has a curiously worth-while education. Oh, she couldn't pass an examination, but I'd say someone who loved her very, very much had bothered a lot to teach her everything. I'll tell you the little I know of April—before she came here. I saw her first, over a year ago, at the Copley-Plaza, a big-eyed little girl, thin and overdressed, in the charge of a young woman who was either a nurse or a governess. I'm always bored to death when I have to live in a hotel, and lonely, too, and the child attracted me. She seemed like a bit of a sunbeam shut in away from her sister sunbeams. I did the usual thing—pumped the chambermaid about her. She said the child was the daughter of an 'actress or something,' who was ill. You can imagine my surprise, almost a year later, to find her here in Blossom, apparently friendless and penniless. She has told me her mother died. But don't you see where Miss Manny's conscience has been strained? Undoubtedly it's the 'actress or something.'"

"Who must be Queenie," pondered Michael Brown.

"Someday April will tell us all about it. Until then she shall stay with me here in Windover. Oh, we'll be as happy as happy as can be. I call it the best sort of fortune. I was dreading having the young people go off to school—I'm always

hungry for young life around me. Unless you're ashamed of me in this disreputable blouse, I suggest that I ride home with you and bring April straight back here. Then she'll have the fun of helping me to get settled. Isn't this the quaintest love of an old place?" She nodded to the narrow, low-ceilinged room. "I wouldn't let Cap'n Joe move a bit of the 'truck,' as he called it. It would be an insult to the place to bring modern things in here. We can even cook on that crane over the fireplace—at least until Judy comes. Judy is going to be my one concession to my spoiled self. Now, shall we go?"

Half-way to the Rectory Michael Brown brought his car almost to a stop. "Say, Leila, couldn't you manage to make the child believe you needed her at Windover? I can't bear to have her know that Camp came to see me or that Mrs. Prowett made a row. She's so young to be hurt by these people."

Leila Lightwood leveled misty eyes on the man's earnest face. "Oh, Micky, you're the same, tender-hearted boy! Do you remember when you ate poor old Aunt Selina Tewksbury's pie, into which she'd put pepper instead of nutmeg, because you couldn't bear to hurt her feelings? And the rest of us laughed when you choked. And that time you found the pheasant with the wing shot away and you threw your new gun down the ravine? Dear, dear, you're

so big now, and you have such a very firm chin that you're alarming, and you're a minister, but I'm glad to find the—soft spots. Yes, I'll tell April that I've come to kidnap her!"

Miss Leila had to plead desperately before she could persuade April to leave the Rectory. April's heart was very set on her secret mission of housecleaning which had had disappointing setbacks through that "cross, horrid old Mrs. Prowett." But Miss Lightwood told her of the funny little rooms at Windover, of the wooden settle before the fireplace, of the assortment of queer, old dishes in rows behind the wooden doors of the cupboards, of the small-paned windows with their deep sills. "We'll have pink geraniums in each window, and Cap'n Joe's going to let me have one of his puppies and we'll have a kitten, too. And you may help me in my work. Why, April, I *need* you!" The last words were uttered with such convincing earnestness that April yielded.

"Will I—have—to go to—school?" she asked.

Miss Leila and Michael Brown exchanged glances. Each read the other's thought. "No, indeed. At least, not this winter. I'll teach you."

"And I'll help. It'll do my sermons good to brush up a little on my A B C's."

April's face brightened in a way it had not since she left Miss Manny's. "Oh," she cried, "I thought

I was never going to be really, truly happy again. How I love you both! And I'll go and put my things in my bag. That poor bag—" she laughed as she ran from the room.

"Micky, have you ever thought that, after all, it's the youngsters who keep this old world going straight? For when our littlest act affects a child, well, the most heedless of us act more carefully. And when they *love* us— Why, didn't Miss Manny appreciate at *all* that child's affection?"

"Not when in the balance with the good opinion of her neighbors."

"Good opinion of her neighbors!" Miss Leila snapped her fingers scornfully. "What does that opinion amount to when it changes like the wind. Of course I'm not as tolerant as you are. I shall tuck April away from them all there at Windover, and they shall not have a chance to stare and put their smug heads together and whisper. Sh-h!" She lifted a worning hand to silence Michael Brown's answer. April was running down the stairs, singing.

Though she had often picniced with the Merediths on the Point and near the old Lighthouse, April had never been inside of the little cottage. For that reason, when she arrived with Miss Lightwood, her curiosity was at a high pitch—the more so because the quaint old place was to be her home, hers and Miss Leila's.

"Oh, isn't it the *jolliest* little house? Look, I can almost touch the ceiling! And these darling windows. You can't see anything but the ocean. It's as though you were miles and miles away from Blossom, isn't it? I shall hate to go to bed for fear I'll wake up and find that none of this is true—that I'm back at Miss Manny's or—or that dreadful place in Boston."

Miss Leila suddenly cuddled the girl in her arms. "April, dear, this is your real, true home! You're going to make me happy and I want to make you happy. And I want to help you, too. We'll work as well as play. But while we have these golden days—let's just play! When my boxes come from New York will be time enough to settle down. See, you shall have this snug little room next to mine."

The "snug little room" opened from a larger room which adjoined the living room. Miss Leila's eyes swept its bare furnishings with a disapproving glance. "We'll have to brighten this up a bit for you. Some blue check curtains at that window and my blue lily quilt—"

"*I* like it," cried April, "because it's close to you!"

"Leave your bag here, child, and come with me out-of-doors. On a day like today I want to be a gypsy. We cut-after-the-same-pattern folks do not know how to enjoy just living. Let's clear up those

neglected flower beds. Then we'll put in some bulbs. I have a notion that little Priscilla Blossom had flowers everywhere. We'll restore Windover. And some night next spring when the first crocus peeps, we'll hear Priscilla whisper to Ephraim that her flowers are going to bloom again. Come along, little sister."

Grubbing with Leila in the old flower-beds, tugging at weeds, softening earth, clipping here and transplanting there, with the golden sun beating down upon her and the sweet sea-winds from over the Point whipping her blood, April found the sting of Miss Manny's wrath vanish as though by magic. Perhaps Miss Leila had wisely planned the magic! Forest Hill was closed now, the girls were back at Oakdale, Mrs. Meredith, and her retinue of servants, had returned to New York. Except for the daily visit of Jeremy and Chubbs, the grocery boy, and old Cap'n Joe Merry, Miss Leila and April followed their gypsy ways undisturbed.

With Miss Leila's boxes came Judy. Miss Leila explained to April that Judy had taken care of her since she was a little girl. She thinks she rules me with a rod of iron, and I let her think so because she is the only bit of "home" I have. But she has a soft heart, and if you show her that you're fond of her you can twist her around your little finger."

Judy was too accustomed to Miss Leila's whimsical ways to express aloud her opinion of the cottage. Had she not followed her mistress all over the globe? She took command in the kitchen with the air of one determined to make the best of a bad thing and ever hopeful of returning someday (if they were not blown clean into the ocean) to sane living in a steam-heated apartment with electricity and an incinerator.

The boxes contained Miss Leila's treasures, without which, she said, she could not live anywhere; a few pictures, beautiful bits of old tapestries, two or three delicate vases, an old Italian writing-desk, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and in which there was a secret cubby for love-letters. Miss Leila explained that it had belonged to a Milanese poetess of the seventeenth century.

"We must tuck these things away where they will not offend the precious belongings of Windover," and Miss Leila, with amazing skill, contrived to do so. "Not for worlds would I have the feelings of that blessed old armchair over there hurt the least little bit." While they were at work unpacking the boxes Miss Leila told April interesting stories of the treasures they unpacked, of incidents that had happened on her many wanderings, of beauties of other lands. She spoke of an intimate acquaintance with the great artist who had painted the original of the

small picture she held in her hand, with the sculptor who had moulded the exquisite figure of the "Wind-child."

One box Miss Leila laid across April's lap with the laughing expression that its contents were hers. "Nothing much—" she hastened to add.

Upon lifting the cover April discovered the "nothing much" to be several pretty dresses, with additional wearing apparel of such daintiness of texture as to make her gasp.

"Oh," she cried, her eyes shining, "these are lovely like—like—" She was going to say: "I used to have." "But I ought not— These must have cost a great deal of money."

"Tut, tut! Not a word, Aprilly-mine. I can't have you going around shivering and naked, can I? And I can't bear to have you look like Deborah Manny made-over. I'm only really pleasing myself. After all, they're just pretty and practical. Run away, now, and put on that brown dress. With your red hair you ought never to wear anything but brown with a suggestion of gold in it."

As the weeks, full of work and play, passed, April, like a sheltered, sun-warmed flower, in the loving atmosphere of Windover, grew and developed. There were lessons, given with delightful irregularity, and books, for Miss Leila had a fresh instalment each week from Boston, so that no one

cared how long a storm raged outside. When Miss Leila was working over the last pages of the mysterious and, to April, awe-inspiring manuscript, April sat with Judy in the sunny kitchen or raced with Frisk, the puppy, over the Point. Michael Brown dropped in often for tea, or supper, as Miss Leila declared it must be called, out of respect to Windover. While the three sat before the huge fireplace he and Miss Leila mapped out terrible adventures for April in geometry and Cæsar. "She's just eaten her algebra, she loves it so!" tormented Miss Leila.

Once Michael Brown touched gravely on April's future. April was drying dishes for Judy, who had the "rheumatisms."

"Oh, Micky, I suppose I ought to be training her to teach or nurse—or something very sensible! But I can't resist just letting her do what she wants, for this winter, anyway. She's such a child. And she has such an extraordinary way of being very happy when she is happy! I want to learn the secret of her gift. And I believe there's a way of putting it to good use in this world. Too few of us have it. Let's wait a little while before we plan seriously."

With her heart so full of gratitude and contentment April could not cherish resentment toward Miss Deborah. Occasionally, through Jeremy or the grocery boy, some word came to Windover concerning

Miss Deborah; she had sold her orchard strip, she had shingles, she had refused flatly Mrs. Cox's offer to let her Sally come and stay nights with her, she was "more cantankerous" than ever.

"A penny for your thoughts, Aprilly-mine," challenged Miss Leila, one frosty evening when the two sat close to the leaping, crackling, drift-wood fire at Windover. "Whither are they roaming?"

"I was wondering if Miss Manny, maybe, isn't lonesome. Of course I don't mean she misses *me*—but it must be dreadful to live all alone! And she just has those waxy, dead flowers—"

"April, wouldn't it be fun to send Miss Manny some orders?"

"What do you mean? How could we. She'd know and she wouldn't—"

"But we won't let her know. I'll write to Boosing Brothers, they are art collectors in Boston, and ask them to place the orders, say one each fortnight. We'll have a few wreaths and then a 'piece' and—what else does she do well?"

"Oh, one that says 'Our Darling.' It's beautiful—"

"By all means we must have 'Our Darling.' I'll write to them to-night."

"But won't they cost a lot?"

"They'll be worth it if they'll bring Miss Manny contentment. I'm heaping coals of fire—for you. There, you needn't ask me what I mean. April, I'm

foolishly rich, I say foolishly because no one deserves to be poor more than I do! And I like to spend my money in ridiculous ways. Besides, I'm in Miss Manny's debt. It's a secret. I've put her in my book." Miss Leila nodded, laughingly, toward her desk. "She won't recognize herself—at least I hope she won't, but she's there and she just makes the book."

The orders were placed with Boosing Brothers, and early in January began to arrive at Windover. Miss Leila and April had many a laugh over the huge cardboard boxes which came by parcel post. They examined the wreaths and pieces, then put them carefully away in the oak chest Ephraim Blossom had built for the treasures of his young bride.

"Think how busy Miss Manny must be—and excited," laughed April while they were hiding the last consignment of a "piece." And, a few days later, word came to them that Sally Cox *was* staying nights with Miss Manny and "helping out" three days a week.

CHAPTER XIV

At the Sugar Bowl

As the winter passed Blossom had gradually forgotten April's performance at the Fair. Indeed, but for Miss Manny, they might have forgotten it in the proverbial nine days. Gossip had smacked its lips much more over the interesting fact that Deborah Manny had "shut the door in that girl's face" than that April, in a marvelously pretty manner, had balanced herself on the back of Lymus Lee's old horse. Blossom, primly decorous, had approved Miss Manny's shutting the door—it said that she must know when black was black and white was white; she had acted with commendable consideration for the reputation of the town. There was no telling, of course, what any girl, who could turn a somersault on a horse's back, might do next!

However, Miss Lightwood, by taking April to Windover, thwarted any expectancy as to what she would do next. So Blossom, after it recovered from the shock of the writer-woman going to live in that old, tumble-down cottage on the Point, had to turn its attention to the new addition Tobias Jenkins was building to his house, to the strange doctor from Portland who had hung out his shingle over the

Post Office, to the Newberry triplets, born the day before Christmas, and "as like as peas in a pod."

Jeremy and Chubbs, occasionally, brought back strange stories of the doings at Windover. Miss Lightwood had been seen to race with Aprilly on the Point. The two of them had slept one night out in the open—Chubbs, passing at an early hour, had seen them rolled in their blankets right out in plain sight! And April made mysterious visits, almost daily, to Lymus Lee's pasture. Later, snowshoes and skiis came from Boston to Miss Lightwood. After that, Miss Lightwood and April often walked into the village on their snowshoes, their merry faces framed in bright woolen caps, gay scarfs flying, laughing, like rollicking children.

That "the Dangerfield girl" went neither to school nor to Sunday-school caused as much relief as comment, for the young people, torn inwardly by curiosity and a grudging admiration for April, would have been sorely tried by the discreet example of their elders in snubbing April.

Blossom knew each time Michael Brown set his face toward Windover. "Three nights last week the minister had supper with the writer-woman," Mrs. Brown told Mrs. Cox, and Mrs. Cox told Mrs. Lee, and Mrs. Lee told Mrs. Gregg and then on, from kitchen to kitchen.

In February Susanna Brewster Newberry, one of the Christmas triplets, died of croup. For awhile, then, the Mrs. Browns and Mrs. Coxes, and Mrs. Lees of the town turned their concern upon the remaining two of the triplets.

In May Miss Lightwood's new book "Windover" was published. The manuscript had been completed and sent off to the publishers in January. Miss Leila and April and Michael Brown and Judy had celebrated with a riotous supper and "party" at Windover. Then Miss Leila had begun work on a series of magazine articles which had been "nesting" in the back of her head.

Blossom might never have known about the new book had not a moving-picture man suddenly appeared at the Post Office, seeking the whereabouts of Miss Lightwood's hiding-place. On his heels came a dozen newspaper correspondents, eager to jot down the smallest fact concerning Blossom. "If you as much as turn around one of them fellers writes it down in his book." And, when Blossom excitedly questioned what it was all about, they jeeringly asked if the town did not know it sheltered one of the most famous writers of the day and, it was suspected, was, as well, the scene of her new book?

The moving-picture man perched himself and his camera atop a pile of boxes and filmed Miss Lightwood emerging from the Post Office; again as

she paused at the corner to read the letter she had opened. The newspaper men wrote interviews with the leading citizens, photographed the main street, the Common, the Emporium, even got a snapshot of Miss Lightwood as she lifted laughing eyes of protest.

Windover Point, the old lighthouse, the little cottage and its pretty tradition, became suddenly famous all along the New England shore.

"I wonder of these Blossom people will find themselves in the book," laughed Miss Lightwood, who was enoying hugely the fame she shared with the town. "That cranky old Mrs. Brown will think she's my darling mothery Aunt Phœbe! And Miss Manny will never recognize herself in the does-not-know-how-to-be-happy Jane Hathaway. April, it's *fun* to write a book! If Blossom enjoys its prominence, I've only paid a debt, for I've had a wonderful winter here, a winter I'll never forget." Looking at April, though Miss Lightwood wondered how much she owed to Blossom and how much she owed to April.

"Aprilly-dear, I am something of a prophet! I predict that, when it has recovered from its sudden chestiness, this village is going to open its arms to you—and to me. Our beautiful, careless, happy life here on the Point, will be intruded upon—"

A rebellious look shot across April's face. Miss Leila caught it.

"They'll open their arms to *you,* Miss Leila—not *me.*"

"Goose, if they're not nice to you I shall order every last one of them off the premises—even if Lymus Lee, himself, appears, with the key to the city on a silver salver! Aprilly-mine, why that awful look?"

"I just *hate* to think any of those people may come here and spoil our beautiful fun! It's wonderful here—with you."

With an impulsive gesture Miss Leila caught April's face between her hands and kissed it. "Say that again, child. Time and time again I've had a twinge of conscience because I wasn't sending you to school, or training you to earn your living in some way, or doing something like that. Micky has hinted that I've wasted this winter. But I sort of felt that what you needed most, for awhile, was just to be happy! I shall tell Micky I was right. Well, to 'divulge' from the subject, as Judy would say, let's not worry about the leading citizens until we have to—let's go to the woods and hunt wild flowers. Oh, how young the spring makes me feel! Let's race to the road. Did you beat me in the last race or did I beat you?"

In a very short time Miss Lightwood's prediction came true. Several of the more prominent women of the village donned their Sunday-best and called at the cottage. Miss Lightwood served them tea out under the budding apple trees. April, in a made-over dress of Miss Lightwood's, flushing under the covert scrutiny of the guests, passed the cups and the plates of little cakes. A few days later Deacon Lee invited Miss Lightwood to give readings from her own works at the Baptist Church social, which invitation Miss Lightwood tactfully declined. A walk to the Post Office became a difficult and lengthy ordeal.

April voiced one vehement protest. In a few weeks the Merediths would return—they had only a little while longer to play just by themselves, at Windover. Couldn't, *couldn't* Miss Leila keep the Blossom people away?

"April, darling, I'd like to—but I've learned that no one can live very long apart from his fellowmen. We haven't any *right* to do it. If we have anything in ourselves to give we must give it. And we must not throw away what others have to give us. Of course I mean things of the spirit! Now—" she waved her hand, significantly, toward the road over which approached three besilked and begloved ladies. "I admit it's hard to believe that those dear souls, who threaten our beautiful solitude, have anything that we need, but sometimes the most precious gifts

are in queer wrappings. Don't look like such a thunder cloud, April. Run and tell Judy to get out the tea things. The wind's too cold to play party outside; we'll have it right here by this sunny window."

One evening toward the end of May April went alone to the village. Judy needed saleratus for her pancakes, Miss Leila had written letters which must go out on the early morning train. As April walked along the Lighthouse Road she breathed in the soft spring air with lifted face; she reveled in the thrill of the springtime that made something inside of her sing. She nodded brightly to the man behind the little window where she bought her stamps. Outside the Emporium she lingered a moment to speak to old Jeremy, who never failed to beam upon her. Her errands done, she walked slowly past the Sugar Bowl, turning curious, wistful eyes upon its snowy glitter.

In spring, summer and autumn the Sugar Bowl was the rendezvous for Blossom's young people. Early though it was on this May evening, little groups of boys and girls were gathered about the white tables within, sipping lemonades and sodas. April thought it must be very jolly to be one of such a group, to linger in the midst of the chatter and the clinking of spoons and glasses! If those laughing young people were any other than the boys and girls of Blossom, who had, through the winter, watched her with averted eyes—

"Good-evening, April!" A voice behind her startled her. She turned quickly. Phœbe King and Nellie Sneed, the two most popular of the younger girls in Blossom, paused on the steps of the Sugar Bowl.

April could scarcely frame an answer for astonishment. All through the winter Phœbe and Nellie had recognized her with only the briefest of nods. Now they gave every sign of wanting to be cordial.

"Isn't this the most heavenly evening?" Nellie asked in a twittering voice.

"We're going to get our fifth soda to-day. Won't you join us, April?"

"Do tell us what that darling Miss Lightwood is doing to-night? I'm crazy to read her book. Aren't you the luckiest girl to live right with her. Don't you like it lots better than with that queer Deborah Manny? And, oh, *have* you seen any ghosts?"

Phœbe caught April's arm and gave it a little tug. Nellie marshaled her on the other side. Thus, convoyed by the leaders of the younger set, April entered the radiance of the Sugar Bowl. Straight to the merriest group in the room the two girls led her. If there was a murmur of surprise it was drowned by Phœbe's squealing reiteration that the next would be her "*fifth* soda."

In the clatter of tongues which followed no one noticed that April sat very still, a little breathless, incredulous. From across the room Josh Markham spied her and joined the group. Phœbe beamed upon him with a prettily proprietary manner; she and Josh had an "understanding," she need not be at all jealous of his awkwardly cordial greeting to April.

Phœbe ordered chocolate soda for April because April did not know what she wanted. Nellie exchanged noisy banter with the white-coated attendant who waited upon them. She had had, in a recent visit to Portland, acquired some very up-to-date slang which she now used freely, to everyone's delight. April, watching her over the rim of her glass, thought she was very pretty and would be nice if she wasn't quite so noisy.

When the little group scattered April had received three invitations. She had not sensed that the careless nonchalance with which they were given was really an effort to bridge the coldness of the past months and make her feel "one of them." As she walked homeward, the spell of the Sugar Bowl broken, she felt a mounting wave of resentment surge through her.

"And I won't go to any of their stupid old parties," she cried, as she finished telling Miss Lightwood of her experience. "They don't really want

me. I'm not a bit different from what I was when they thought I wasn't good enough—"

Miss Lightwood indulged in one fleeting smile of triumph. Young Blossom had sought out April. Old Blossom must succumb sooner or later. And, before she was through, they must atone to April for the hurt they had given her. But April must meet them half-way.

She regarded April's mutinous face with serious eyes.

"Come here, April-storm, out into the dusk. You and I must talk."

CHAPTER XV

Ghosts and Apple Blossoms

Miss Lightwood led April to the old bench under the apple trees. Both sat, for a moment, in silence, entranced by the beauty of the twilight. A fragrance of apple blossoms and new grass and damp earth enveloped them; a freshening breeze, with a tang of salt in it, touched their cheeks; a glow of red still colored the tops of the pine wood on the slope beyond Forest Hill; against the dusky blue of the heaving sea the old lighthouse stood like a ghostly shadow.

A robin sang a note or two, heavenly sweet, from a nearby tree—another answered; there was a whirr of wings.

"Oh," Miss Lightwood spoke in a hushed voice, "the wonder of moments—and places—like this! How the little material things sink into insignificance. See, April, that star— And smell the sea— Did you notice that the old rose vine has buds? In a few weeks our cottage will be a bower."

Under the magic of the evening April's sulkiness slowly vanished—but not its cause. The very beauty of their shut-away cottage, of the Point, in its carpeting of new grass, the deep blue of the sea, the

budding flowers they had nursed so tenderly, made her hate the more to have outsiders intrude upon their unconventional life.

"When things go wrong, April," Miss Lightwood went on, "there's no better cure than ten long whiffs of good out-of-doors. I've always found that it straightened things out splendidly—even the worst tangle. This is precious, isn't it?" She lifted her face to the pink canopy of the tree branches. "Like a fairy land. I shall always remember my winter at Windover. That December gale—I can hear the wind roar now! And the week we were snowed in; when he rescued us Cap'n Joe was so disappointed to find us as cosy as could be. And now the wonder of the spring!"

A dreadful fear seized at April's heart. "Oh," she cried, "I can't *bear* to have you talk as though it was all over! Can't I ever have a home like other girls and—"

"Hush, child! Your home shall always be with me. When I took you last fall I assumed a responsibility which I am not likely to shirk even if I were less fond of you than I am. But we must know something more about one another. I am not going to ask you to break that absurd promise Miss Manny made you make, but if I should guess—and guess right—it would only be fair to tell me that I have guessed right?" She made her tone light. "First

of all, I'll guess your mother was—a bareback rider in a circus!"

April's eyes grew round. "Oh, how *could* you guess?"

"Simple—your own riding, the pink skirts—and Miss Manny's prejudice."

"But, oh, Miss Leila, she was wonderful. They called her La Belle Queen. Claribel, she was my nurse, said there was never anyone like her."

"Some other time you must tell me more about her. Second guess—your mother was ill and lost her position with the company she traveled with."

"How *can* you know all that? Those were dreadful days. At first I didn't mind, it was exciting going to school 'cause I never had. But we moved from one place to another and Queenie grew worse and worse and I was so worried, and Claribel had to go away and then—and then—"

Excitedly April told her story, with youthful incoherence, so that Miss Lightwood had to put it together, piece by piece. Toto fitted into the picture as a kind friend and guardian of April. But why had he not answered April's appeal? It would not be so very difficult to locate him, Miss Lightwood mused. And yet April was now so happy, so content with her, that it might be unwise to force her back into the uncertain fortunes, the merciless grind, the empty claptrap of circus life.

"Why does Miss Manny think circus people are wicked?" demanded April, her story finished. "They are good people—I'd like to see Miss Manny prove that they are not!"

"April, probably poor Deborah Manny never in her life came nearer to a circus than she did the afternoon she watched you ride. It's prejudice. And the less the Deborah Mannys of this world know about a thing the true-bluer they are in their prejudices!"

"But they all think so—at least she said they would if they knew."

"Oh, they'd all stick staunchly to their prejudices," laughed Miss Leila. "Prejudice, April, is like the nasty Dodder that twines its deceiving tendrils about the stalks and stems of a flower, finally choking and killing the beautiful growth. Prejudice grows around our souls—if we let it—just that way. And mostly always it springs from and feeds on ignorance."

April tried very hard to understand the comparison. Miss Lightwood's eyes had a far-off look, about her lips played a whimsical smile.

"April, I've heard your story, now wouldn't you like to know something about me? You think you know it all? Oh, there is a lot more than just that I've traveled about and made a little succes with my books—more, even, than that I went through Vassar."

"Oh, please tell me," begged April, proud that she was to share Miss Leila's confidence.

"Looking very far back," mused Miss Leila, "I think I must have always been a rebel. Even when I was a little girl in very short skirts and very long stockings, I used to rebel at the fates that shut me behind glass windows when such an interesting world passed by outside. I wanted to know more of those people and where they were going and what they did. I knew they didn't do the things I did, and I wanted to do things with them. I played by the hour that I was the little girl with the shawl over her head who, each Thursday night, carried a huge bundle of laundry to the house in the next block. One very cold afternoon I begged to bring her in and have a tea-party with her, but my mother was horrified and told me that I must never dream of doing such a thing, that I might run out and give her a coin and that I could have a little tea-party for some of my friends the next week, but that I must never associate with a child like the one who carried the bundle. I tried to explain to my mother what I wanted, but she paid no attention to me. I think the determination took root then in my soul to, some day, break away from my gilded prison and mingle with all the little girls who wore shawls over their heads and carried bundles. And the determination grew as I grew older.

"What a disappointment I must have been to my mother! Though her dreams for me did not go be-

yond a sort of butterfly-in-hothouse existence, they were her mother-dreams and I was her only girl. She did not want me to go to college; she did not want me to talk of a career. She said college girls grew plain and dowdy with their learning and that they lost their charm. There's prejudice for you, April!"

"Throughout my Senior year she cherished the hope that I would go home after graduation and be introduced to her society. Poor, little, pretty mother, I had to hurt her so! I had begun to write a little. I had had a few stories accepted; more came back, however. I determined to know what was the matter with them, so I took all my courage in my hand—and my latest returned manuscript—and faced a real editor in his den. He was not at all awful—we're very good friends, now. He talked to me as though I was a little girl. And he told me I was 'seriously handicapped by my family flesh-pots.' When I asked him what he meant, he said: 'Aren't you one of the Lightwoods of Philadelphia?' I said yes, and he answered that I had just about as much chance of knowing life as it really is for most human mortals as a story-book princess. I went away with my old feeling of rebellion against the walls that shut me from the real world. And I vowed I would escape them."

"What did you do?" begged April, hanging on

the story with breathless interest. Miss Leila's manner made it very real.

"Instead of going home after graduation I took a position in a glove factory. And, oh, what a stupid worker I was—and how my legs and arms ached! And how hard I worked to be as efficient as the others. A little wisp of a girl next to me could do twice what I did! And I tried so hard to live just like the other girls did and to make them like me, but they would not—they looked upon me as an outsider; in everything I did or said they looked for sham and insincerity. And finally the foreman discharged me because he thought I was some sort of a labor agitator. Then I took a position in a department store. In the waists. I did better there, and the other girls liked me. I roomed with a girl from the notions. She was taken sick. I nursed her nights and spent my wages buying dainties for her. April, I came very close, then, to the awful loneliness of some lives —and their drabness. She belonged to the girl-with-the-shawl class and she was a sweet, good child, and such a very, very little made her happy. Afterward she went to Saranac—and she died there." Miss Leila's voice faltered for a moment. "My mother spoiled my work at the store. She called on me there in all her darling magnificence. After that I had to give up my position; I was too conspicuous among

my fellow-workers and—*they* did not believe in me, anymore."

"Did you go home?"

"No, mother went to California and I went to another city and took a position as cashier in a restaurant. I hated it, but oh, I saw some wonderful sides of human nature. Then I did society on a newspaper and was raised to writing 'specials.' After that I went home—with my mother. She was not well and I wanted to make up to her if only a little for what I had made her suffer. My five years of rebellion had given me a wealth of experience—and understanding. I had learned to know the real in people. But I had learned, too, that if we are true to ourselves we can be real wherever our paths are thrown. That is why the girls at the glove factory had looked upon me with distrust—they knew I was not one of them, that I was not 'real,' that I was pretending."

"It's just like one of your own stories," said April.

"It wasn't easy, April. I loved nice things and comforts and pretty clothes. But it was worth it. It helped me understand people. Some—like Micky, are born with a bigness of understanding; others, like me, have to acquire it. That's why Micky can always see the good things in anybody. He was always like that."

"He wouldn't think people are wicked because they belong to a circus?

"No, indeedy!"

"And, yet," April's voice was vibrant with remorse. "I was so disappointed when I found out my Mr. Nice-face was a minister, 'cause we—the people in the show, you know—always thought ministers dreadfully unlucky."

"Aha, prejudice, Miss April!"

"Did you know him—Mr. Michael—very, very well when he was a little boy?" April asked.

"Oh, very well. He's younger than I am, but he always played with the older boys. I always thought he was meant for big things—he could have had a gilt-edged parish in New York City, you know, but he chose this. That was like him. And it's like him to think his people here, in this two-penny town, are worth all he does for them."

April stared thoughtfully into the gathering dusk. With a quick humility she saw herself small and selfish, clinging, like poor Miss Manny, to resentments and prejudices. And she wanted so much to be like Miss Leila and Mr. Michael and like her Toto.

"You want me to be—nice—to those girls?" she asked suddenly.

Miss Leila patted her hand. "Bless your heart, child, how quickly you have caught the thought back in my head. I want you to always try to find the real

in anyone or anything—whether it is that simpering Nellie Sneed or poor, cranky old Miss Deborah—or anyone else. It's there—good or bad. And if others have an opportunity to know the real in you—well, their very last prejudice will crumble fast enough, see if it doesn't!"

"Phœbe's sort of fun, anyway," April advanced, as though arguing with herself. "'Course she isn't as much fun as Rose and Chrissy. But I'll be as nice to them as I know how," she finished, with comical solemnity.

We will have a happy summer, child, even if we do let all Blossom into our paradise. And after that—well, I have promised Micky to make serious plans for you. No, no, not a word of them now. What do you say, Aprilly, to letting Miss Sands make over that green organdy of mine for you to wear to Phœbe's party? I want you to look your best, and you are particularly bewitching in green."

"Oh, I'd *love* that! May I run in, now, and try it on?"

After the girl had gone Miss Leila lingered out under the apple blossoms. A chilliness had crept into the air. She shivered. Ghost memories, wakened by her story, haunted her—memories of her girlhood. She had only touched lightly, to April, on those five years of her life, but depths in her heart had been stirred. It had not been easy to forsake the

bright way of ease and girlish pleasures; friends had misunderstood her, laughed at her, called her "crazy." She had stubbornly faced unnecessary privations and humiliations, she had hurt the being dearest to her of all the world. And from it all had learned that there is not so much happiness in this old world that one can waste or needlessly destroy one little bit of it. Happiness—her thoughts turned to the child who had run indoors to slip on the green dress. Fifteen years, and, though into them had been crowded much of pomp and adulation and change, from them had been denied more—she had never had any of the hide-and-seek sort of play, the gang companionship, the healthy, rollicking fun that is a fundamental of childhood.

Were there many little girls like that—who, though to all appearances having everything, were being cheated of something that was their right? Miss Leila, alone under the deepening dusk of the sky, wished she could gather them all to her. "I'm glad I had April his winter, anyway," she murmured, aloud. For, though Michael Brown might think she'd wasted the winter *she* knew that the lightheartedness of the last few months must have healed the hurt of the girl's bright spirit. That thought meant more to her than the book she had written. Across her mind flashed a bit of a phrase she loved: "Everything we do is going to make its mark on something—a nation, or the soul of a child."

CHAPTER XVI

Changes

"I have expected this—for some time." Miss Lightwood let the letter she was reading fall into her lap. With troubled eyes she stared out through the rain-splashed window.

"Oh, is it bad news? Aren't they *coming* to Forest Hill?" cried April. Through the storm she had hurried back from the Post Office with the letter, certain that it would tell them the exact day and hour of the Merediths' arrival.

Two sharp lines wrinkled Miss Leila's brow. "Bad news—yes. And yet it may be the making of them." Then she smiled at April's perplexity. "This is from Chrissy's mother. They are coming to Forest Hill. But—Chrissy's father has lost all of his money. I knew he'd been trying for over a year to avert some sort of a crisis. I didn't know, though, how bad it was. Caroline says, here, that they've sold the automobiles and that she has discharged all her servants. Mrs. Todd will cook for them at Forest Hill. They're going to lease the New York house. What a tremendous change! I wonder if they will have the courage to face it."

"But when are they coming?" For April could not possibly sense the significance of the Meredith downfall. In her experience riches and poverty had been more or less jumbled together. To her the important thing was that her Rose and Chrissy and Keith were coming back; that Forest Hill would be again open.

"A week from today. Perhaps all this will cure poor Cousin Caroline's nerves!"

But one hour with the Merediths, after their arrival, dashed Miss Lightwood's hopes. Mrs. Meredith persisted in making the family misfortune a black as possible. She'd almost rather see her poor children in their graves than to have them to face this terrible humiliation—her husband had failed her and his children! Whatever could poor Chrissy or Keith do? The sound of their voices from the porch, where they were chattering with Rose and April only brought a fresh outburst of tears. In the year both Chrissy and Keith had grown amazingly—Chrissy had acquired a very becoming grown-upness; Keith's happy-go-lucky manner had changed to an easy importance befitting his sophomoric status in college. Miss Leila, watching them, thought again that their father's financial ruin might be their making. However, there was no use suggesting this to their mother. Miss Leila knew that poor Mrs. Meredith believed too staunchly in the power and blessing of

riches. So, though she wanted more than anything else to shake her, Miss Leila endeavored to sooth her by pointing out to her how comfortable and even happy they oculd be at Forest Hill with Mrs. Todd while Thomas Meredith bent every effort toward saving something from the wreck.

Chrissy and Keith were experiencing an immense relief in the shelter of Forest Hill. With youthful selfishness they had felt far more sorry for themselves than for either their father or their mother.

"Dad ought to have seen all this coming," Keith had repeated over and over, ignoring the fact that, time and again, his father had begged his family to practice economy. "It's darned hard on a fellow placed like me! I'm glad to get away from the fellows at college."

"How'd you feel if you could see the girls all whispering and looking at you? That horrid Sylvia Dale's father hated Dad. She told all the girls. They stared at me as though I was a beggar! I'll never, never, *never* go back to Oakdale."

The younger Merediths were exchanging these confidences immediately after their arrival at Forest Hill. For the first time in their lives they were glad to be in Blossom. It was remote from the scenes of their recent humiliations. Its serenity consoled them; their catastrophe faded into the semblance of a nightmare from which they must awaken to the com-

forting knowledge that it was not true! The familiar things about them, the sloping lawns, the stately trees in their delicate foliage. Cyrenus Todd's flower-beds, freshly blooming, helped this illusion. It *could* not be true that all the happy luxuries that had been theirs would be theirs no longer!

And April, too, diverted their minds from their tragedy. She was so radiant at their return that they could not help but catch her spirit. To her it meant nothing that Thomas Meredith had lost thousands and thousands of dollars, that automobiles had been sold and servants dismissed—why should anyone mind that when one could rejoice in the anticipation of another happy summer—picnics on the Point and on Pigeon Island, cruises with Cap'n Merry, hikes over green fields and through pine woods. And, too, she had so very much to tell the girls of her winter with Miss Leila. She felt, with excusable satisfaction, that they would envy her those idyllic months at Windover, that they might even contrast her fun with their fun at Oakdale.

Her happy mood acted as a tonic upon Chrissy and Rose. April thought Chrissy very splendid and grown-up and Rose "sweeter than ever." At April's insistence, the Merediths, somewhat reluctantly, consented to include Phœbe King and Nellie Sneed and Josh Markham in their first picnic!

As she listened to their planning Miss Lightwood again had that persistent conviction that out of Thomas Meredith's failure might come much good. She had just left Mrs. Meredith in an impossible state of lamentation—it was useless to try to even reason with her. But she found Chrissy and Rose very happy at Windover, discussing with April the picnic lunch for the trip to Pigeon Island.

"It'll be a long pull, Chrissy, but I believe you'll make it," she said, half-aloud. And she did not refer to the cruise to Pigeon Island. "Only what a shame to have let them plaster you over with such snobbery! "Them," in Miss Leila's mind, meant the the nurses, and governesses and instructors who, from the cradle, had presided over Chrissy's gilded destinies.

The youngsters, Miss Lightwood reasoned, must make things easier for their mother and father. She seized upon an opportunity that very day to talk of it to Chrissy. She could appeal only to Chrissy's warm-heartedness, for there had been nothing in the girl's training to help her comprehend the full extent of what had happened to them or to know how to meet it. That realization, Miss Leila had sense enough to know, must come gradually and painfully. No use mentioning to Chrissy now, that she might not "finish" at Oakdale, or indeed, at any other expensive and exclusive school, that Keith might not

go back to college, and that there could be no immediate thought of the year abroad—. Instead, she roused in Chrissy's kind heart the desire to make things as easy as possible for her mother, to help Mrs. Todd, who was too old to undertake all the work of the household, and to write long, cheerful letters to her father, impressing upon him that they were very comfortable and contented in Blossom.

Chrissy did not know that she was setting her face toward new things. She only felt a novel sense of responsibility toward her family. She took upon herself, delightedly, the ordering of the household supplies, keeping hodge-podge accounts in a huge old ledger the found in her Grandfather Truitt's desk. She set Wednesdays aside to sweep and dust, and though the sweeping and dusting were too often left to poor Mrs. Todd, it gave Chrissy a sense of well-doing to *talk* of Wednesday as her "sweeping day."

She convinced herself that it was fun being "democratic," by which she meant associating with the Blossom young people. She could understand, now, why Keith had always liked Josh Markham. Nellie Sneed was a "scream," and not unlike, except in the matter of dress, many of the more superficial girls at Oakdale. And it was an immense relief, too, to feel that it did not make any difference to these girls and boys that they were no longer "rich."

Neither expensive clothes nor automobiles were essential in Blossom. Here values were different; one did not judge another by the quality or cut of a garment, by a style of hair dress or the possession of some costly fad.

The spring had brought other changes in Blossom. Into the straight-thinking minds of the older of Blossom's men and women was forced the realization that a new spirit had come to the town with Michael Brown. None of them knew just how to analyze it; many frowned upon it, others were suspicious of "new ways." The new minister was so unlike old Doctor Snow, who had been rector at St. Stephen's for twenty years. Yet, and they all had to admit the fact, never, in the history of St. Stephen's had so many young people regularly attended service.

The deacons of the First Baptist Church often discussed this fact, at first with careful indifference, that no one of them might think they were the least bit worried. But their concern was brought to an acute head when they learned that St. Stephen's had leased the rooms over the Emporium and was going to open a billiard room and a gymnasium, where basket-ball games, dances and plays could be held.

"Blowed if I know what that foolery has to do with God's Word, but I *say,*" and Ezekiel Sneed brought a big fist down upon his neighbor Lee's table, "that, if *that's* going to keep folks in the church, why I'm for a dance-hall, too."

Deacon Lee frowned at the suggestion. *Two* dance-halls, *two* billiard rooms—what was Blossom coming to?

Little old Noah Tubbs who, quite by accident, having dropped in to borrow Lymus Lee's potato planter, was in on the confab, and belonging to no church, could speak impartially, broke in, with his cracked voice: "Why, jine in *with* 'em, jine in *with* 'em!"

Certainly not at all like a seer, the little old man had, however, revealed the vision to the distraught deacons. Of course—*one* hall for the First Church and St. Stephen's, alike, for *everyone!* Their thoughts leaped ahead—the big shed back of the Post Office was available, too, and a little money—

The very next day the deacons approached Michael Brown. They found him in his back yard, coatless, bareheaded, teaching Jimmy Brewster the principles of boxing. Michael Brown kept them waiting for a few moments while he explained an important point to the boy. He did not consider it necessary to offer any apology for his unusual occupation. "Good thing," he commented, nodding toward the departing youngster, "trains them in quick thinking and fair dealing and how to protect themselves."

Because their all-work-together policy was only a day old in their minds the deacons stumbled awk-

wardly in their effort to lay their plans before Michael Brown. They could not know that the attentive young man, standing before them, had been working for a long time toward this very moment. Michael Brown had not wanted to win any young people away from the Baptist Church. He had, long ago, dreamed of this community house where all Blossom could play together, winter and summer, but he had known that Blossom was not quite ready for the idea. He had had the patience to wait. Now, if he could let these pillars of the town believe that the plan was entirely theirs, he would have their solid support.

"Splendid! Splendid!" he declared. Then he talked rapidly of what an advantage it would be to the town to have its young people—and old ones, too, —learn to think and act in groups, together. "Every denomination," he insisted, and the deacons nodded approval. "Every sort of clean sport," and they nodded again, a little helplessly. "We'll form a base-ball team for the girls, too." And, in the excitement of the moment, they approved even that. For the next half hour Michael Brown, with rapid strokes of the pencil, sketched and outlined plans; neither of his callers suspected that he had had them all in his head; they set him down for a "young feller with a whole lot of git-up-and-git to him."

The deacons walked away from the old Rectory with the somewhat disturbing feeling that they had started something very big. What would Blossom say?

"Don't know what the missus will think of all this," admitted Ezekiel Sneed. "Baseball for the girls! She worries a lot 'bout Nellie. Nellie's headstrong. Like my side of the house. And since she's visited the folks up at Portland she's been awful discontented. Wants to be on the go ev'ry minute."

Deacon Lee contemplated the stretch of road ahead of them. He loved the little town where generations of Lees had lived and died; like all public-spirited citizens he was always dreaming dreams for Blossom, measuring possibilities.

"Mebbe it'll keep this town alive, Ezekiel. There ain't no wrong as I can see in billiards or dancing or baseball, either, even for our girls. Mebbe it'll keep the young folks here. Mebbe build things up." In his mind he saw a vision of a booming town, ahum with new industries, an influx of eager, strong young workers, new homes, a rise in the value of real estate, perhaps the old shipyard restored, all from their community plan!

"And we thought of it, brother," he said solemnly.

CHAPTER XVII

The Accident

Two weeks found the rooms over Sneed's Emporium transformed. A modest sign at the side door informed the passers-by that the Blossom Community Club had its headquarters there. And, while grown-up Blossom was struggling to adjust itself to this "new-fangled notion," the young people were dividing into committees to organize teams of all sorts.

To April's delight she was put on three of these committees. She was beginning to feel at ease with Phœbe and Nellie Sneed's friends; when before she had instinctively been on her guard against some slight, now she sought out the girls with happy confidence. Miss Leila, with her wonderful insight, saw the gradual change in the girl's spirit and rejoiced over it.

With April interested in the community plans Chrissy and Rose had to lend their support, too. Chrissy was a little condescending, but when they asked her to coach the basket-ball team she roused to a real interest. Keith was helping to arrange the dance whch was to formally open the new club-rooms; Miss Leila was directing the painting and

simple furnishings of the billiard room and the small reading room.

Older Blossom watched these lightning-like preparations with wavering approval. Few were likely to go against what Deacon Lee and Ezekiel Sneed supported, let alone Michael Brown, but—they were dubious as to where all this tomfoolery might lead them. And Blossom was more perturbed than it cared to admit (because of the distinction Miss Lightwood had brought to the town, and because she was acting just as though she belonged to Blossom) at the way every one was taking up "that Dangerfield girl." Mrs. Sneed, in the seclusion of her kitchen, voiced her fears to Mrs. Lee, recalling how "Debory Manny'd driven the girl out and Debory Manny likely knew what *for*—there was something behind *that!*" In her excitement Mrs. Sneed admitted that she "couldn't do a thing with Nellie—Nellie didn't lift a finger 'round the house—she'd like to know what baseball had to do with making a girl a right sort of housekeeper, anyway—and Nellie was as thick as molasses with that Aprilly Dangerfield." Mrs. Lee gave the mother scant comfort when she added her opinion that "the Dangerfield girl'd grown right pretty fixed up in the clothes Miss Lightwood'd given her—she was at Forest Hill's much as she was at Windover, and it hadn't seemed to bother *her* none because folks had given her the cold shoulder—any-

way, Maria Perkins had told her she believed Debory Manny'd missed the girl, with all her shutting her out, because Maria Perkins said Debory was queerer and crankier than ever. Anyway, 's long 's Miss Lightwood had taken up the girl no one could exactly snub her."

"Well," Mrs. Sneed's head had tossed, "nobody said anything about *snubbin'*, but she'll bear *watchin'* no doubt, and *I'm* goin' to watch her."

To have watched April in those early days of the summer would have taxed even a more alert person than the watchful Mrs. Sneed. There were not enough hours in the day to do all the things she wanted to do. With everything else she had promised Nellie Sneed to help her dye the stockings for the girls' baseball team. They were to be red to match the red ties. She was on her way to the drug store to purchase the dye when she met Keith and Josh Markham, rushing headlong from the Club.

"What do yon think's the latest, April? A ripping idea! Michael Brown's going to help us. We're going to have an orchestra of our own!"

"What will you play?" asked April with prompt interest.

"Oh, I'm not going to play anything, but the other fellows are. Begin in a modest way, you see. Brown says a man can come down from Portland once a week to train us, and we can rent instruments at

first. Someday, maybe, it'll be an orchestra worth while." April was as unconscious as Keith of the significance of his "we." Josh Markham broke in eagerly:

"I always wanted to play a flute. Cy Jenkins can fiddle great. And Bill Sawyer can raise the dead with his cornet."

The boys rushed on leaving April to ponder this latest development of the club. Suddenly she was startled by a loud shouting. Turning, she saw Lymus Lee's horse emerge from a cloud of dust, in maddened flight down the road.

"Look, look, *little Dorcas Lee!*" screamed some one behind her. A child was clinging to what was left of the old truck, tossing with it from side to side, in constant danger of being crushed against one of the big trees.

"She'll be killed," moaned Mrs. Perkins, covering her eyes.

Two men were running out into the road, waving coats and hats in an ineffectual attempt to stop the frightened animal.

The horse, his head bent, his eyes fiery, his nostrils dilated, was a sight to frighten the bravest heart.

"Gullfaxi!" cried April. Like a flash to her mind came the memory of Marky's voice training and controlling his charges, while she, a very little girl, stood

by and admired. "Whoa-ee-ee," had always been his low-voiced command.

Not for an instant did April hesitate. Impelled by a sudden courage she jumped to the center of the road. Ezekiel Sneed shouted a warning, but she paid no heed. As the horse came nearer she cried loudly, "Whoa-ee-ee!" The frightened animal tossed his head, his heavy breathing beat into her ears. "Whoa-ee-ee!" As he came abreast of her April threw herself at his bridle. With all her strength she pulled at it. The animal's speed lifted her from her feet and dragged her along. "Whoa-ee-ee! Whoa-ee-ee!" she managed to cry. "Gullfaxi! *Gullfaxi! Whoa-ee-ee!*" With a snort the animal pulled up short. As he did so, one of his great hoofs struck April's shoulder. She dropped unconscious into the dust. Over her the horse stood very still, head hanging, its quivering body white with foam. As in the days of his glory, he had obeyed the command he knew so well.

Tender hands lifted April and carried her into the Post Office. Others rescued the weeping Dorcas, frightened but unhurt. Half a dozen rushed off for the doctor. Jeremy, stumbling about in everyone's way, declared his "wagon's outside, and he'd get Aprilly to Miss Debory's in the shake of a lamb's tail!"

In the excitement of the moment, strangely enough, everyone forgot that Miss Manny had "shut her door." Her claim on the heroine of the hour superceded all others. With reckless indifference, the men threw their coats into the wagon and, lifting April in, made her comfortable among them. Jeremy slapped the reins on his horse's back and a procession, such as had never passed through Blossom's highway, moved slowly toward Miss Manny's. Alongside and behind the rickety wagon walked young and old of Blossom. Summoned from kitchens and barns by flying urchins, more women and more men rushed out and joined the throng. Over all hung a heavy silence, broken only by occasional whispers and the tread of feet; hearts, overflowing with the veneration always given to a courage that risks life to save life, beat with quick apprehension as all eyes turned to the small huddled figure, prostrate in Jeremy's wagon.

A little later April awoke to an immense astonishment. Her eyes opening slowly, first beheld the "God Bless Our Home" worked in wool and framed in sea-shells. Shifting, they made out Jeremy's head in the doorway and his arm holding back others who were trying to get into the room. The new doctor from over the Post Office was holding her wrist. There was a terrible pain in her shoulder and down her arm—she never, never, *never* wanted to move, in all her life. And someone was crying on the other

side of the bed. What she did not know was that Miss Manny's yard was crowded with anxious men and women who moved respectfully aside to make a passage for Miss Lightwood and Michael Brown, the latter coatless and hatless.

Just as April was trying to move her eyes to see who was crying the doctor touched her shoulder and she fainted again. When she came back to consciousness she found herself bound in close bandages and dressed in one of Miss Deborah's primly stiff night dresses.

"Darling, what a fright we have had!" Miss Lightwood bent over her, a glass of sweet-smelling stuff in her hand. But it could not have been Miss Leila who had cried by the side of the bed! And—

"Where am I?" asked April in a weak voice.

"At Miss Manny's, dear. They brought you here. Drink this." April obeyed. Miss Leila's voice was soothing, her touch light. "The doctor says it is nothing worse than a broken shoulder. It will mend quickly."

As a recollection of all that had happened slowly dawned over April she caught Miss Leila's arm. "Then it *is* Gullfaxi! It is! It *is*! He heard me. He *knew*. Oh, I'm so glad I found him." She made a sign to Miss Lightwood to bend closer. "He was a ring-top! My mother rode him, a long time ago, before he was too old." What mattered the pain and

ache in her body—she had found a real, true friend, who needed her the more because he was a poor, old, cast-off horse.

"Where—where is Miss Manny?"

Miss Lightwood smiled broadly. Triumph lurked in her eyes. "Downstairs preparing a feast for you! And if you could look out of your window, April, you would see the whole town walking down the road. Michael Brown has just been telling them that you will be out again in a very short time, provided you do just what I tell you to! Not a man or woman of them would stir from this yard until he'd heard the truth."

April's eyes glanced about the familiar room. "But this is Miss Manny's room!" she whispered, wonderingly. "I can't stay—here."

"You must, until you are well enough to be moved back to Windover, April. And I will come every day and take care of you."

April had no time to mourn the fact that she must miss the opening of the club, and the first baseball practice—when Chrissy or Rose or Miss Lightwood were not at her bedside Miss Manny was there, pressing delicacies upon her. In her manner there had been, from the first moment of April's return, a pathetic humbleness which set queerly upon her grim features. April was too young to recognize it; she only thought that Miss Manny was very kind to give

up her own comfortable room and to fuss so over her, and that it *must* have been Miss Manny who had been crying by the side of the bed!

In the days which followed all Blossom brought gifts to the little heroine, and all sorts of gifts: pies, cookies, cakes, jellies, a silk handkerchief, a crocheted collar; Michael Brown brought books; Keith contributed games and came in every day to play them with her.

Two weeks after the accident Miss Manny came to April's room in great excitement. Deacon Lee and his wife had come to see her. Miss Manny whisked out of sight numerous small effects which "cluttered the room." Then she smoothed April's tousled hair, straightened the spotless counterpane, and called down to the distinguished visitors to "come right up."

It was Miss Manny who received them, standing, sentinel-fashion, by the side of the bed. Miss Manny assured them that Aprilly was as "smart as could be," and "goin' to be around in a few days, mebbe" And Miss Manny plainly intended that there should be no doubt in Mrs. Lee's mind as to the friendly relations between herself and April.

In his kitchen Deacon Lee had practiced a speech, properly expressive of his appreciation of the act which had saved little Dorcas from serious injury. The speech was to conclude with the presentation

of a twenty-dollar bill. "It'll seem a lot to a girl like her. Mebbe ten'd be enough!" he had considered.

In April's presence, however, he forgot his speech and even the twenty-dollar bill did not seem enough for what she had done—*no* bill could be enough. While his wife was trying to adjust herself to Debory Manny's "turnin' right 'round and motherin' the Dangerfield girl after puttin' her out," he was awkwardly telling April that if "there was anything she wanted she could have it, or his name wa'nt Lymus Lee!"

April sat bolt upright. "Really *truly?*" she cried. "Oh, I want it, very, very much. I can't tell you why, but I love Gullfaxi—your horse. And he didn't mean to run away—he was frightened. The old wagon broke—he isn't *used* to wagons—" she spoke breathlessly, half-pleadingly.

"D'you mean *Jim?*" broke in the Deacon, in perplexity. For a moment he wondered if the girl's mind had been "upset" by the accident.

"Yes, yes—Jim! His name is—I call him Gullfaxi. He'll never, never run away again. But will you promise to be very good to him and not make him work too hard? And someday I'm going to buy him!"

Deacon Lee hastily promised that Jim—or whatever the high-falutin' name was Aprilly called him—should henceforth lead a pampered life in green

pastures, working only on the days when Blossom folks wanted ice. Afterwards he opined that "he'd gotten off easy, 'cause if the little lady'd asked him for the moon he guessed right that moment he'd have promised it to her." And Mrs. Lee, quite of the same state of mind, added that it was "real mean the way folks had talked about Aprilly. She was a bright little thing, and every bit as much of a lady as Nellie Sneed."

The next day Miss Leila excitedly announced to April that the doctor had said that she could be moved back to Windover. "Micky will take you out in his car this afternoon. I'll tell Miss Manny when I go down."

After Miss Leila's departure an ominous silence fell over the houeshold, broken only by the squeak of Miss Manny's rocker below. And, Miss Manny *never* rocked in the daytime! Something must have happened! April called but Miss Manny did not hear her. If she was well enough to go back to Windover she was well enough to venture downstairs. She slipped out of bed and crept noiselessly down the narrow stairway. In the door of the sitting-room she stood stock-still; incredulous. For, sunk deep in the little old arm-chair, her apron over her face, sat Miss Manny—crying.

"Oh, what *is* the matter?" cried April.

"Land a'sakes!" Miss Manny lifted a startled face, red from her weeping. She looked very small and very old and very pathetic. As on that first night of April's coming she was giving way to emotions grimly denied all through her life. Of course she did not say to April "I don't want you to go away. I love you. I'm sorry I treated you so cruelly. I want you to love me. I'm very lonely. I need you." Instead: "Don't worry your head over an old woman like me, Aprilly. And nothin' on your feet! I'm havin' a good cry all by myself. Miss Lightwood'd scold me if she knew I'd let you come down! I—I don't know *what* possesses me"..and back went the apron over her face.

April, standing, a little faintly, over the huddled figure, felt what was behind the incoherent phrases. Her well arm reached out, her hand timidly touched Miss Manny's shoulder.

"Would you like to have me—stay?"

Miss Manny caught at the small hand. "I ain't had an easy moment since you went away, Aprilly, and I don't care, now, who I tell. I didn't act like a Christian and I knew it the moment you turned down that road, for I was lookin' through the blind. And I'd have called you back 'cept for my wicked pride And I deserve bein' lonely and wakin' up nights worryin' with remorse. And I deserve havin' you go back to Miss Lightwood. And I'm not

ashamed a bit to have you know I'm cryin' or that I'm sorry you're goin'! You were cert'nly good comp'ny, Aprilly, this house wasn't the same after—"

Late that afternoon Michael Brown sat in his automobile outside of Miss Manny's gate. Miss Lightwood had gone in after April. As he waited, he studied the shut-up, grimly plain exterior of Miss Manny's house—so very like Miss Manny's own life! Suddenly Miss Leila came out alone, walking quickly, two spots of bright color in her cheeks.

"Where's April?"

"Drive me off Micky. I am tempted to murder —or kidnap—"

Michael Brown, obediently, started his car. Miss Leila suddenly drooped. "The worst of it is that April's practicing my own preachings."

"Well—"

"She told me she'd found the 'real' in Miss Manny—and that Miss Manny needs her more than I do—and that she feels she ought to stay—there."

"Well—isn't she right?"

There was a moment's silence. "Yes—April's right. But, oh, Micky, I want her. I *need* her. It was making me feel so contented, so worth while, just knowing the youngster depended on me, thinking that she belonged to me. It meant *home.* I was going to take her back to the city with me—"

"And spoil her!"

"If you don't stop looking as though you were glad I'll jump out of your car!"

In the little room at Miss Manny's April lay with her face buried in a pillow, sobbing convulsively, for it had broken her heart to let Miss Leila go back to Windover without her. But from below came a curious singing—it was April's "Gentle Saviour, Lead Me." In her astonishment April lifted her head. She had never heard Miss Manny sing before!

CHAPTER XVIII

Rose Goes to New York.

With April confined at Miss Manny's, an added depression had fallen over the young Merediths. Rose felt it more, even, than the others. The changes in the living conditions at Forest Hill were giving her much mental distress. It was not fair, she worried, that Chrissy and Keith should have to go without things when she had so much. And she would not find it as hard to be poor as Chrissy did. At the little Episcopal school she had been trained to help herself, to take care of her own clothes and her own room, to sew, and to cook. She helped Mrs. Todd, now, in innumerable ways, and quietly, so that no one but Mrs. Todd knew about it. But she wanted to do more—she wanted to give her own allowance to Chrissy and Keith, or, at least, divide it.

"Of course things are dreadful, but we're not beggars *yet!*" Chrissy had met her suggestion crossly.

"I guess *not,*" had been Keith's quick retort. "You'd better hang on to all you've got. It's rotten hard to be broke."

"But you wouldn't be beggars or—or anything to be ashamed of! Aren't you all the family I have?" Rose entreated,

"Father wouldn't like it. It's our bad luck. You're only our cousin. No good your mixing in it."

In spite of her boasted confidence poor Chrissy was beginning to feel very helpless and very much of a failure. The month's housekeeping accounts had run up to an extravagant total. With only old Mrs. Todd to manage, household affairs were getting into a sad state, and there was no use bothering her mother about them—her mother spent most of her time shut in her room. And Keith offered little comfort; he jeered at her ineffectual attempts at economy, mocked her whinings. In turn, she taunted him by little innuendoes, spoke of his "loafing." The spectre poverty loomed close in their shamed young eyes.

Rose, sensitive to the increasing ill-nature, decided, quite suddenly, to carry her plan to her Uncle Thomas, in New York. Though the success of her trip demanded secrecy, she wisely took Miss Leila into her confidence, and Miss Leila helped her slip away. Rose had never traveled alone; the journey assumed terrifying proportions. Only her determination to win her point urged her on.

New York in the summer was very different from the New York she had seen on the days when the young ladies of Oakdale, carefully chaperoned, went shopping or to a matinee or a musicale. And as the taxi carried her into the lower part of the city

her fright grew. The roar of the streets beat into her ears; huge walls seemed to press about her; she shrank back into a corner only to be jolted forward by a sudden swerve and stop.

Suddenly she felt more afraid of her Uncle Thomas than of the rush of the big city. She had really seen very little of him; during the vacations, when she was with Chrissy and Keith, he had almost always been in the city; when he was at home he had always watched her with a strange expression in his eyes that had held her off. Under it Rose had often felt uncomfortable and was always glad when he went away. But, she reasoned now, he must love Chrissy and Keith; he would be glad she wanted to divide her allowance.

It was not difficult to find her uncle's office. An obsequious elevator man indicated the door she must open. A young woman rose instantly upon her approach to the heavy rail which divided the main office. Rose knew of no office formality; she merely asked, in a very small voice, if she could see her "Uncle Thomas."

At that very moment Thomas Meredith was affixing a signature to a legal-looking document. Strangely, as he did so, great beads of perspiration broke out upon his forehead, his hand trembled. And the name he was painstakingly writing was "Rosemary Meredith." When he had finished it he

blotted it. Then he tugged at his collar as though something was choking him. He rang a bell. To the boy who answered his summons he entrusted the legal-looking paper, carefully sealed in a big envelope.

"Take that over to Biddle and Co. at once."

As the boy went out of one door Rose entered by another. At the sight of her Thomas Meredith leaped from his chair, with a queer inarticulate sound.

"You—"

Rose was too nervous over her errand to wonder at her uncle's unusual agitation.

"Of course you're surprised to see me, Uncle. I —I want to talk to you—on business. I couldn't write. Keith says you won't consent but I want to so much—"

With a tremendous effort Thomas Meredith had pulled himself together. He had to moisten his lips, however, before he could speak.

"Do what, child?" What nonsense had brought her to his office?

"I want to divide my allowance with Chrissy and Keith. I want you to divide it when you give it to me—so that they'll take it. Of course it wouldn't be a great deal, but I can't bear to—"

There was a moment's tense silence. Thomas Meredith was making rapid circles on his desk blotter with a pencil. His eyes were lowered. In his attitude Rose imagined disapproval. "He isn't going to let me," she thought.

"My dear child," the man's words came slowly, heavily, "you are very generous. But your request necessitates my telling you that—you can no longer draw your allowance. I paid it—from my own pocket. I chose to do it—the way I did, so that you might never feel you were dependent upon me. You would, of course, have had to know very soon that, at your father's—death, you were left penniless. It is very hard for me to tell you this, child."

Rose stood, stunned, scarcely able, all at once, to grasp the situation.

"So, my dear, you must go back to Blossom and try to show Chrissy and Keith how to stand up under this misfortune." He sighed as though he were very tired. "I thought I was giving my family everything money could buy, but I guess you can't buy grit and a good backbone, can you?" He laughed at Rose's perplexed face, a sharp laugh that made Rose shiver. "Are you afraid to be poor, too, Rose? Never mind, I may be able to straighten things out after a little. Are you taking the afternoon train for Boston?"

Rose told him she was, that Miss Leila was going to meet her there.

"Can you find your way back to the station?" he asked abruptly. Rose felt that he was anxious to be rid of her.

"Oh, yes, indeed," she answered with an assurance she did not feel.

Outside she suffered a bitter rebellion of feeling —not because her allowance was gone, there was some satisfaction in knowing that now she must face things on the same footing with Chrissy, but because she had no one to whom to turn for advice and comfort. More than once Rose had felt a tugging longing for the father she could not even remember. She had always pictured him tall and distinguished like her Uncle Thomas, but unlike Uncle Thomas, affectionate and sympathetic, younger, too, and full of fun. *He* would not have dismissed her so summarily, let her go away, alone! He would have cuddled her to him and have talked things over; he would have shown her how she could help him.

She had been a dependent upon her uncle's generosity; she must go on living by his support when Chrissy and Keith and Aunt Caroline were sacrificing comforts. It was unbearable!

"I won't go back! I'll work," she muttered aloud. The sound of her voice startled her. She realized that, in her agitation, she had walked blocks.

She stood bewildered. Men and women pressed and pushed about her. Most of them streamed into the gaping entrance of a stairway which led under the ground to the subway. Others poured out from the depths into the bright sunshine. No one noticed Rose, except to push her aside. Two girls paused, for a moment, close to her. Both were chewing gum,

both wore cheaply smart little hats, thin waists and high heels.

"Got fired to-day."

"Did'ya really?"

"Foreman's got a grudge 'gainst me. *I* should worry."

"I'd hate t'get fired now. Ma's sick—" They moved on and were lost in the throng.

These men and women were hurrying back to work. Rose watched them with a new understanding. How many there were! She saw them, now, not as a terrifying crowd, but as individuals, each with his or her burden. She remembered what Uncle Thomas had said about "grit" and "backbones." These people, who rushed past her, worked because they had mothers and sisters and little children to work for. And, though they shoved and crowded, they were not at all cross—they *liked* to work, because they had "grit." Even the girl who had stood at her elbow and had been "fired" had not let herself be discouraged.

Rose suddenly felt a great desire to get back to Blossom—she and Chrissy must face things; they must work, too. They must do something to earn some money. Perhaps April would help them think of some way. April could always think of something about anything.

They would show Uncle Thomas that *they* had grit!

"Taxi?" came to her ear. She signalled the driver.

"Grand Central Station," she directed, stiffly, not in the least afraid. "And hurry, please," she added, because that sounded very grown-up.

CHAPTER XIX

Inn-You-Go.

Miss Lightwood lifted her head from her task of weeding her border bed. April, Chrissy and Rose approached, arm in arm, up the winding path.

"Good-morning, girls. You advance like an army—all in fighting trim."

"We *are* in fighting trim," answered Chrissy quickly. A new tone in her voice made Miss Leila glance at her. Chrissy colored. "Cousin Leila, we want to talk to you very seriously."

Rose and April nodded their confirmation of Chrissy's request.

"Dearie me, what has happened? Can you wait until I wash some of this good earth from my person? Or must we sit right down under the trees and have it out, now?"

"Oh, please, right now."

"Don't wash, Cousin Leila."

Rose's story of the trip to New York had had a singular effect upon Chrissy. She marveled at Rose's venturing forth alone; no longer could Rose be a timid "prudy" and " 'fraidy-cat" which she still loved to call her. She was amazed that Rose was not crushed by the loss of her allowance. Something

very determined and splendid seemed to have been roused, like a sudden spark, in Rose's spirit which Chrissy promptly caught. Rose talked of "facing things" and "grit" and "working" and gave it all such a popular note that Chrissy wanted to do something without delay.

What that "something" could be they were not able to decide. April, in whom they immediately confided, assured them that there were lots of things they could do but that, of course, they must do what would most quickly bring them a fortune.

"Maybe we'd better talk to Miss Leila," she had concluded. Accordingly, they had lost no time in seeking her out.

"We want to work and earn some money," began Chrissy.

"We must," added Rose, determinedly. "It's— it's not right to just sit idle and let Uncle Thomas support us."

Miss Leila, looking at their earnest faces, knew better than to remind them of the countless little economies they might learn, which, summed up, would amount to a material figure off Thomas Meredith's debit sheet. Their exalted mood, she felt, would not tolerate suggestions concerning the housework, or their fall clothes. Nor to Chrissy's "what can we do?" could she answer that they were young and inexperienced. True, they had first to learn how much

they did not know, but they had youth's precious assets, vigor, an untired spirit and confidence.

April, too impatient to endure any long silence, broke in upon her thought. "Can't we sell things?" Plainly she had cast her lot with Rose and Chrissy.

"What can we sell?"

"Yesterday I had hard work not to sell Windover and the Point and the Lighthouse," laughed Miss Leila, "I was hoeing my corn, looking like a peasant in my overalls, when I was hailed by a party of tourists who had been picnicing out on the Point. They wanted to go into the cottage. Judy had walked down to the village so I took them in. They thought I was the caretaker, I suppose. They made no effort to conceal their curiosity or their enthusiasm. They were from Ohio and it was their first visit to New England. They wanted to buy everything in sight for souvenirs. One fat lady called my little kettle over the hearth "precious." Her daughter offered any price for the old door-latch on the kitchen door. I was sorry Judy was not here. She might have more respect for poor Windover if she had heard the value Ohio placed on it."

Chrissy sprang to her feet.

"Why, just the *thing*, girls! We'll sell antiques. Blossom must be full of old things."

"And New England's full right now of people from Ohio," laughed Miss Leila.

"Chrissy, you're brilliant. We might have sat here for hours and never thought of it."

"Well, April really started the idea—about selling things, you see. Now, let's plan seriously."

The council of four was plainly inspired. In an hour their plan was complete—Blossom's attics must be thoroughly ransacked; the antiques must be sold at Windover, because the cottage was on the State road, and the picturesque Point and Lighthouse always attracted tourists. Miss Leila consented to this without a moment's hesitation.

It's so lovely here," April said, with a little sigh. Since she had chosen Miss Manny's, Windover seemed more than ever attractive and like a story-book place.

"And let's have some tables and chairs out under these trees and serve afternoon tea."

"From real old teapots. And we'll use our Willow-ware cups."

"And I'll coax Miss Manny to fix little baskets of flowers. She can wax happy flowers—not grave flowers. I can pick her lots from the fields and the gardens."

"What will we call it?"

More discussion followed. April suggested "Inn-You-Go," and "Inn-You-Go," by a vote of four, was selected.

Prompted by this brand-new community spirit,

Blossom, at the request of the young people, willingly turned its attics inside out. All kinds of treasures were discovered and hurried to Windover—old clocks, tables, big and small, candlesticks, queer old vases, silver and brass pieces, dishes, discarded door knobs and knockers and stops, old letters with signatures of famous men, jewelry, samplers, delicate pieces of embroidery, bonnets of a century past, hoopskirts and wasp-waisted bodices. In a few days spent in cataloging, April learned whole volumes of New England history.

For a week Keith and Josh Markham worked feverishly with hammer and paint brush.

Upon the opening day of Inn-You-Go, a wooden sign, stained yellowish brown and swinging from a piece of iron grill, drew the attention of the motorists to the little cottage and the Lighthouse on the Point. Low tables and chairs set out under the apple trees invited patrons to linger. The "antiques" were displayed in the living room of the cottage. Tucked about everywhere were Miss Manny's flowers—"happy" flowers, as April had planned. At first Miss Manny had protested at "fussin' with jest weeds," but, after one or two nosegays had been finished, she admitted that they "looked real pretty and it was kind of a change to be fixin' flowers that didn't make a body think o' the last long sleep and the resurrection."

"Don't the things look lovely?" cried Chrissy, sweeping an appraising eye over their work. "I think we ought to ask more for this old locket, Rose. It's a dear." She held up a quaint hair locket set in blue enamel.

"Let's change it, then," answered Rose, promptly, reaching for a new tag.

"Girls, I see a car!" called April, from the front of the cottage. It's stopping. *Oh,* it's Michael Brown." April felt a stirring of disappointment; to her still clung the old notion that ministers might bring ill-luck.

The young managers of Inn-You-Go rushed out to meet their first patron. In their fresh white dresses and with their eager faces they made a pretty picture as they pressed around him and dragged him to one of the tables. Miss Leila brought out some sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade. Then the girls showed him the antiques. After careful consideration and declaring that it was very difficult to make a selection when everything was so attractive, he bought the little blue enamel locket. Rose cast a wildly troubled look at Chrissy, but Chrissy's face did not change expression.

"I know a very dear lady who will be married soon. I shall keep this and give it to her for a wedding present. She has so many, many things that she

will love something quaint and old from Inn-You-Go."

Afterward Rose declared that she had felt like a cheat when she took Michael Brown's money! Chrissy, more worldly-wise, sniffed. "Why, that little locket would have cost him twice as much in Boston. Do help me check up our sales. Isn't it great, girls? Thirty people stopped here. Let's see, we sold the locket and the candlesticks, and that Mehitabel Parson's sampler and Mrs. Lee's glass doorknobs. How many flowers, April?"

"Ten bunches. And that green car's going to stop on its way back from Maine to get some more."

"Who *says* we can't earn money?" cried Chrissy, brandishing her pencil. "Only, this antique business's going to be work, girls. And I'm tired to death now. Wasn't it funny that Michael Brown was our first customer? And to have him buy the locket. Say," she turned her head toward the cottage and carefully lowered her voice. "Who do you suppose is the friend who's going to be married?"

Rose was adding the total of the day's sales. She shook her head absently. Chrissy went on: "Maybe it isn't anyone in particular. Did you see him look at Cousin Leila when he said it? He's always looking at her. Haven't you ever thought that Michael Brown's lots more attentive to Cousin Leila than just a minister need be?"

"They're old friends," protested April.

"Why, you silly, I'm not saying anything *against* Cousin Leila. Of course they're old friends, but sometimes friendship ripens into romance. You girls are blind. Why did Cousin Leila stay all winter in this old place—I'd like to know? And, I guess, April, you can't deny Michael Brown was here 'most every day."

"He wasn't here—he wasn't here more than—" began April, hotly. Chrissy's laugh interrupted her.

"You act as though I had accused them of something awful! I think it would be nice. I'd like him for a cousin, only he'd have to take a parish somewhere else. I heard Mother and Cousin Leila talking about him one day, and Cousin Leila said he ought not bury himself in Blossom."

April's cheeks were flaming. "He will—he refused a big parish in New York. And Miss Leila stayed here because she wanted to—"

"That's exactly what I said! She *wanted* to."

"Eighty dollars and seventy-six cents," cut in Rose. "Our commissions for to-day are thirty-six dollars."

"And we have to pay Miss Leila for the food."

Chrissy and Rose rushed indoors to complete their accounts. April was left to wonder at her tumult of mind. Why should she not, like Chrissy, be delighted over a beautiful romance between her

beloved Miss Leila and Michael Brown, next to Toto, the best man in the whole world?

"She's older," a rebellious voice, within her, argued. "As if *that* mattered—" she could hear Chrissy's retort.

Jealousy, all consuming, flamed in April's heart. By and by Miss Leila and Michael Brown, wrapped in their selfish happiness, would forget her. They might go away—as Chrissy had said. Well, when Toto came, *she* would go away, too. She would take Gullfaxi and go back to the white-tops.

The girls joined her. Miss Leila came out with them. She was very excited over the success of the first day at Inn-You-Go. But April found herself covertly watching her expressive face for some change—some suggestion of secret joy.

"She might have told *me*," she thought, nursing an unreasonable, but none the less real, sense of hurt.

CHAPTER XX

Poor Keith

"Why, Keith, you act so—funny!"

April sat on the top step of Miss Manny's side porch, hemstitching a cuff. Hemstitching was, for her, a very new accomplishment, and her needle went in and out very slowly. It was necessary to watch each stitch closely too, and to bite her underlip. But lifting her eyes suddenly, she had caught the strange expression on Keith's face. She laid the bit of white muslin in her lap.

"What is the matter? You've come to tell me something!"

Keith nodded. "I have. I've got something to tell you. I'm telling you first, April."

April studied him, frowning a little. What was so suddenly different about him? He wore the same clothes; he was well-groomed, as usual; he had stuck a flower in the lapel of his coat, but he often did that —what was it? And why was he telling *her* something first?

"I'm going away," and Keith dropped his voice to a sombre tone.

"Away?" April stared.

"Yes. Will you be sorry, April?" he persisted, coloring, and avoiding her glance.

"Where are you going?" demanded April, in much the tone Chrissy would have used.

"Maybe you think I'm joking or—or just going off any old place. But I'm serious, April. D'you think I'm going to sit 'round here and let you girls earn money and do nothing? Have everyone look at me and think I am soft and a sissy? I'm going out West!"

"Oh, Keith, you're *not*—" Now April was as concerned as Keith could want her to be. He squared his shoulders with excusable pride.

"Ye-s. West. Oil fields. Got a job with the Acme Drilling Company. That's Preston's father, y'know. I've got to start at the bottom, but you just see if I don't get to the top."

"Oh, Keith, that's *fine!*" April was in a glow of pride. "Of course you'll work to the top in a little while."

"I'll feel like a man, anyway. Couldn't sit round here whining, you know. I hate to give up college, but I'm not the first fellow who's had to go West."

"But it's so far away. Couldn't you do something—nearer?"

Keith had wanted her to say just that—to act as though she could not bear to have him go.

"The West is the only place," he muttered. "Big,

you see, things doing. I'm going to Oklahoma first. I'll have to live pretty rough."

"Oh, Keith, you're wonderful—to be willing to do all that! I know you will succeed. But what will your mother say?"

Keith had not come to discuss what his mother would say. "Well, she'll fuss a lot, but I'm going. Dad knows about it. He talked with Mr. Preston. But, say, April, I—I—wish you'd say *you'd* miss me—"

April's eyes widened.

"Why, we will, Keith, a lot. Blossom won't seem the same. Though, we're so busy now with Inn-You-Go and the clubs. It seems as though we'd left all our jolly picnics and kid fun somewhere behind us! Everything's changed."

Keith shuffled his feet nervously. April watched him—he really cared very much about going away and was trying to hide it. It must take a great deal of courage to leave home and go far off and face all sorts of unknown dangers! She was about to pat his shoulder consolingly when he wheeled about and lifted a frowning face.

"I mean—will *you* miss me, April?"

"Of course, silly—" April picked up her sewing hastily. Something in Keith's flushed regard frightened her.

"That's what I wanted to ask you. I wanted to

tell you first about my going. You're really making me go!"

"What do you mean, Keith Meredith?"

"I mean—I want you to—I don't want *you* to think I'm a helpless simp or—or anything! I want you—say, April," he caught at the hand that held the sewing. The needle pricked his finger, but he did not know it. "I care a lot about you. I mean—different, you know."

For an instant April stared at his flushed, earnest face, then she burst into a peal of laughter. Keith dropped her hand. Instinctively, unconscious of the motion, he put his injured finger into his mouth. The little gesture added to his hurt look.

"Oh, Keith, you're so—funny."

The boy stiffened. His face flushed, then went white.

"You can laugh at me, April, if you want to. I wouldn't tell you—this—*now,* if I wasn't going away. And I'm going to tell you, whether you laugh or not. I've never thought that you're like other girls—Chrissy's friends and the girls 'round here. I never knew anyone in the least bit like you. And I think I've always—cared—a lot 'bout you. And don't you care something for me? You don't *know* any other men, do you?" he finished with a note of triumph.

April's rose-red face reflected her mingled feelings. She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry, she wanted to box Keith's silly ears—she wanted to close her own and run indoors—and yet the boy's face was tragic in its hurt and—he was going away, far away.

"Of course I like you, Keith, better than any of the other boys, though I don't know any boys. I like you real well, Keith—lots—just the way I do Rose and Chrissy!"

Keith caught at her hands. She thrust them behind her so his dropped, clasped, upon her knee.

"Not any better than that? Not any—different?"

"Why—I—don't know! Oh, Keith, please don't be so silly! We're so young. It's going to be years and years and years before I—"

"I'm not too young to strike out for myself, April," broke in Keith, "and a fellow can know his own mind, I guess. I'll never like anyone better'n you, I swear that right now. And I'm coming back and get you, April, when I've made a good start. Will you wait for me?"

"I won't *listen,* Keith!" April cried, protestingly.

"You *will* listen. I'm coming back, April. You're a kid and you don't know whether you care for me like that or not! But you will. I'm going to give you this—to make you remember." He took a small ring from his pocket, captured one of April's hands and slipped it upon her finger.

April snatched at it. "I won't take it—I won't wear it, Keith Meredith. I—I didn't want you to—say all this—" The little ring dropped into her lap.

Keith's voice suddenly softened.

"Well, keep it anyway and wear it when you want to, April. But—I'm coming back for you. And I'm going to work good and hard so that it won't be awfully long. I'll never forget you, April." He rose abruptly. "Will you wish me good luck?" he added, sadly.

"Oh, Keith, I don't want you to go away—I do wish you good luck. We'll always be—I—I—" April tried desperately to manage her troublesome voice, to keep back her tears. If only Keith would not look as though she was making him terribly unhappy! If only he were not going away!

"April, won't you let me kiss you good-by?"

"*No!* I—oh, Keith, good-by." April swayed a little toward him, then drew back. His caress fell on the top of her red head.

For a few seconds after he had gone April sat very still on the step. With flaming red cheeks she rebuked herself for not having silenced his silly nonsense. Yet he had looked very handsome and very manly and very much in earnest. And he had always been good to her. With a quick intake of breath she caught the gleaming little ring, rushed indoors, up the

stairs and to her room. Pulling out the top drawer of her bureau she hid the ring among its contents.

"So *there!*" she cried defiantly. Then, overwhelmed with a feeling that she had glimpsed beyond a curtain into vast spaces of life, the wonder of which frightened her, she threw herself across her bed and wept into her bent arm.

"Toto!" She wanted Toto, she wanted to go to him and sit on his knee and snuggle into the protecting crook of his embrace.

CHAPTER XXI

The Stranger.

Keith's first days in the "big west" challenged all the courage he could muster—a courage that more than once broke before an overwhelming homesickness. The brave hopes he had brought with him from Blossom, most of which centered about April's bright head, lost their rosy color; that goal of success which had seemed so near was very far away.

With the other men on the drilling gang he felt absurdly young and inexperienced, which hurt his self-esteem. Though underneath their raillery there was rough kindness and an obvious desire to help him over the hard places, the boy found it difficult to always meet their banter with an outward show of good nature.

Two things helped him—his superb strength, built up in clean play on gridiron, tennis court and golf stretches, a strength which won the respect of his fellow-workers and rewarded him with such a wholesome appetite that the indifferent food of the boarding-house tasted as delectable as Higgin's choicest entree, and the long evenings of leisure when he could write letters home. Most of these letters went to April. They were boyishly boastful over the very

things that were most discouraging, they valiantly pictured a future beyond all expectations, and they hinted, vaguely, as to that time when success would be reached and the writer return to Blossom. April had answered just once, a funny stilted letter, of a friendliness all too plainly guarded lest it border, in any way, on the sentimental.

In the middle of August an order came to Augusta from the main office of the Acme Drilling Co., directing the foreman to send an outfit into the Beggs' field. Keith, to his disgust, was transferred to the new gang. He did not want the change, he knew the men of the old outfit, now, and he liked them and they liked him. The new tools were delayed, too, so that the Beggs' gang had to wait in Tulsa until they arrived. This meant days of enforced idleness, during which Keith hung around the bustling, noisy hotel, trying desperately to fight off a longing to take the first train back to Blossom.

He haunted the desk in quest of mail. "Any letters for Keith Meredith?" he asked, half a dozen times a day. One morning, turning away after the desk clerk had smilingly shaken his head, he frowned with envy upon a little man at his elbow who was sorting over several envelopes. He bought a magazine and sank into a deep chair with the hope of losing himself in the pages of a story. But even the adventures of a daring airman failed to hold his at-

tention. Glancing up, with a shrug of impatience, he found the little man watching him from the neighboring chair.

The stranger's glance was kindly. In it there was a friendliness, too, which went straight to Keith's homesick heart.

"Stupid, hanging 'round even a hotel like this, isn't it?" the little man asked.

Keith nodded, emphatically. "Worse! Our crowd's waiting for new tools. We're going down to the Beggs' field."

"Drilling?" No one could be in Tulsa without knowing of the oil boom in that section. The little man asked Keith what company he was with. He had heard of the Acme—Elliott Preston was its president, was he not?

"You're from the east, aren't you?" asked Keith, suddenly, hungrily.

"Oh, I'm from—all over," the other answered, with a smile. It was a rare smile, it transformed the tired face, it gave the corners of the man's lips a whimsical lift. Keith felt its warmth.

He concluded that the stranger was prospecting —or already in the field. If he knew Elliott Preston he was probably high up. But he was not particularly interested as to the little man's business; boy-like, he wanted to talk of himself, of the work back in Augusta with the other outfit, of the new lease in

the Beggs' section, of the prospects there, the new gang, his own chances of promotion, of countless things which leaped to his tongue. He rattled on, encouraged, now and then, by a question, or a word of affirmation, from the stranger.

"You've recently come from the east?"

Keith nodded. "Three weeks. Had to quit college. I wanted to come out here where there are chances of something big. My father's business failed, you see. Poor fellow, things are pretty rough for him, just now!"

The stranger gave a sudden start. "Thomas Meredith—*failed?*" Then, as Keith stared, he added: "I heard you give your name to the desk clerk. Are you Thomas Meredith's son?"

"Yes. Do you know my Dad?

"Of—him. It is startling to learn of the failure of such men as he—of such an old business. It seemed as steady as Gibraltar."

"He made some bad investments and it started things going wrong, Keith explained, somawhat generally. "Lots of men would have saved their own necks any old way they could, but Dad's not that kind!" The boy's face glowed with pride. "But he's awfully cut up."

"Hasn't he—hasn't he—" The stranger suddenly bent and gathered up his newspapers which had dropped, unheeded to the floor. "—a niece, a brother's child?"

"My cousin Rose? Say, you know the whole family! It's as good as meeting an old friend. And I'll tell anyone I was pretty darned homesick right that moment you spoke to me."

The little man smiled his rare smile again. "I knew your father's—brother—quite well."

"Then you know, of course, that he was lost in some shipwreck down in the South Sea. Guess he was a queer chap, wasn't he? Dad never speaks of him. But Rose is a nice kid—awfully pretty. She and Chrissy—that's my sister, are no end pals. She lives with us, now, you know."

"She is rich, is she not? Didn't her father leave her—something?

"Funny thing about that," confided Keith. "Rose always thought she was on easy street. We all did. She always had a big allowance. When Dad went broke she wanted to divide her allowance with Chris and me—that's the sort she is—and Dad had to tell her that he'd been giving her her allowance out of his own pocket and letting her think it was her very own so she wouldn't feel dependent upon him. Dad was awfully cut up to have to tell her. But she and Chris are no end game—they're running an antique shop up in Blossom and, believe me, they're doing a howling business. They've cleaned out Blossom and now they're cleaning the county. They—I say,

what's the matter?" For the stranger had suddenly sprung to his feet, his face white and set, his eyes flashing steely glints.

"I—nothing, boy." The man made a desperate effort to control himself. "I—"

"You're not sick, are you?"

"I had a—something, here," he touched his heart with a vague gesture. "It's nothing. It—will—pass. I'm glad to have met you, young man, *very* glad!"

Keith did not want him to go. "But can't we have lunch together—or dinner?"

"Sorry. I am leaving town this afternoon." Without another word the man walked abruptly away.

"I'll be—hanged," muttered Keith, after his departing figure. Keith did not want him to go; there had been an encouraging friendliness, a likableness, about the man that had won Keith's interest and regard. It had driven away his homesickness, too.

"I'm going to find out who he is!" And Keith strode over to the desk clerk.

"Say, you saw that man I was talking to, over in the corner—little fellow, gray suit, nice smile—"

The hotel clerk stared at Keith.

"Don't you know?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"No—never saw him until just now!"

"Why, that man's the clown, Toto—greatest

clown in the world! With the Bushman Show. Better see it."

"But he said he was going away this afternoon."

"I guess you heard him wrong. Show's here for two more days. Room number, please?" The clerk turned his attention to a stout lady.

Curious, certain that the hotel man must have made a mistake, Keith went out to the circus that afternoon. It had been a long time since he had gone to a circus; he felt his pulse quicken, as it had in childhood days, to the heavy smell of dust and animals, the blaring discord of the band, the shrill of the steam piano, at the clowns as they tumbled out of the pad-room, at the dizzying performances, at the pomp and glitter. But, though he searched everywhere for the friend of the morning, he could not find him.

His failure pleased him. "I *knew* he wasn't any clown—a nice fellow like that!" he said to himself, as he went out into the sweltering sunshine.

CHAPTER XXII

Justice

The indifferent young person who guarded the railed approach to the inner offices of The Thomas Meredith Company had noticed nothing unusual about the little man who had asked to see Mr. Thomas Meredith and then had stepped on toward the inner door. And yet she had heard something like a sharp cry from the smaller room.

"You—*you*—" Thomas Meredith clung to the edge of his desk with shaking fingers. Across from him, his back against the closed door, stood his brother, Alfred Meredith, known and beloved as Toto Conge—the Prince of Clowns.

"Yes—me." Alfred Meredith's voice was quiet, controlled, but his eyes, usually so kindly, were stern.

"How—dare—you—come—back?" The words escaped from the older man's dry lips.

There was a tense moment of pause. The little man smiled, a queer twisted smile of irony. "Dare? Isn't that a rather queer word for you to use to—*me*—under the—well, circumstances?" He knew he commanded the situation. He laid his hat on the desk. "May I sit down? And may I suggest that

you sit down, too? What we have to say to each other cannot be said quickly."

With a slinking motion of his limbs Thomas Meredith dropped into his chair. His face was gray, his eyes were fastened, with a curious horror, on his brother's face. It was as though he really had believed he had been shipwrecked!

"Quite by chance," Alfred Meredith chose his words slowly, carefully. "I heard of your business —difficulties. I ran into your boy in Tulsa—at the hotel. No," as the father started from his chair, "he did not know who I was. Our meeting was very casual. The boy was homesick and wanted to talk. He's a fine boy. And he spoke of you in a way I like to hear a boy speak of his father. He's proud of you. To him you are above other men."

Thomas Meredith's face dropped into his hand. His involuntary act convicted him more than any spoken confession.

Alfred Meredith went on, "He told me, too, that *my* little girl—my Rosemary—had lost everything; that she's working, now, up in Blossom." He stopped abruptly, afraid to trust himself. He leaned suddenly across the desk. "What have you to say?"

Thomas Meredith lifted his head. Often, during long, sleepless nights of worry, he had pictured the possibility of this moment—this Nemesis. Now it was at hand—he must meet it.

"It is true. I invested her money—with my own."

"But how? And what of those reports you have been sending to my lawyer?"

Thomas Meredith answered with a simple lift of his shoulders.

"Were they faked?" cried Toto. "Are you a forger, too, as well as a thief?" He shook violently, his eyes blazed. "Is that what you call your honor? The honor—to which I entrusted what was dearer to me than life? Honor, bah! To you and your family—*my* family—I, the clown, was a disgrace! I shamed you! I became an outcast! For such as you!"

Raising a hand to stay his brother's scorn, Thomas Meredith plunged into a half-appealing account of his misfortune. It had begun in a small way, with a few unwise investments; he had then plunged in order to recover what he had lost. There was always, too, the pressure of the increased cost of the luxuries his family demanded. Then came the temptation to use Rose's money, sent on each year by her father; just a little of it at first, then more and more. Finally he had had to transfer certain good stock—it had necessitated signing her name. He felt an immense relief in unburdening his mind, even though it was to the very one who held his fate in his hand.

"It has been very hard on my family—and on your girl, too. Don't forget—" sharply, "that it was your own doing that put your girl in my care! Now, don't you think that it is going to be even harder on her to have you—come back?" He spoke slowly, he knew that it was his only weapon of defense. "Will she mind being a little poor one hundredth as much as knowing that her father is a—clown?"

Alfred Meredith shrank back as though from a blow. The other, seeing his advantage, went on hurriedly.

"You yourself brought the girl to me so that she'd never know anything about you. I've lived up to that part of my agreement. I've never let her even suspect that you were not lost at sea. What are you going to do? Expose me? And let her know? Drag the family name in the dust?"

Alfred Meredith rose from his chair. Small though he was he seemed to tower over his brother. His face was set.

"Once before you and my father charged me with dragging the family name. For its sake I was disinherited. I am supposed to be dead. Only the clown remains. A man does not know how much "family" means to him until he is cast out. I have thought a lot about that. My life has been desolate, I am starved for my little girl. I could have stood it,

though, until the end, if I had not—heard. But now—"

"Can a man who's supposed to have been shipwrecked fourteen years ago come back to life?"

"It has happened," Toto retorted, dryly, "just as often as men have escaped punishment for wrongdoing. I am—coming back."

"But Keith—my wife—" implored Thomas Meredith.

Toto laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I like your boy Keith. I am not goint to hurt—you—in his eyes, or in your wife's. I'll make a bargain with you. Give me a frank statement of your affairs and how much it will take to straighten them out and start again. I'll advance you the money—clown-work's a pretty safe investment after all. And no one will know from me of our agreement. In return I will take back my position in our family. I will risk a chance on my little girl loving me! She's Kitty's child."

"You *mean* it?" Thomas Meredith stared, unbelieving. The stricken look slowly lifted from his face.

"I mean it. And I'll break my contract with Bushman. How long will it take to go over your books? Can I catch a train for Blossom this afternoon?"

All the long pent-up worry and remorse in

Thomas Meredith's heart gave way in a convulsive sob. His head went down upon the desk. "I don't deserve this! I don't deserve this!"

"Come, now, Tom, shake hands on our bargain. We won't think of ourselves—we'll just think of Keith—and Rose."

Thomas Meredith caught his proffered hand.

"Ted—" Strangely, he used the nickname of boyhood days, "after all—you're the better man—you're the better man!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Toto

"Miss Rose? Like's not you'll find her down to the Windover cottage where she'n Miss Chrissy sell antiques. No one to home here—'cept Mrs. Car'line and she's lyin' down. Jest take that path there next to those beeches. Goes straight to Windover. If you follow your nose you can't get lost no matter how hard y' try."

Mrs. Todd stood on the step at Forest Hill and eyed the stranger who had, at her direction, turned into the path. Down in the flower bed, Cyrenus Todd, his watering can suspended in mid-air, eyed him, too.

"Now, who do you s'pose *he* be, Cyrenus? Askin' for Miss Rose. Nobody I ever remember asked for Miss Rose. Never saw him before. Now, I wonder—"

The stranger disappeared in a bend in the path. He walked with a quick, light tread that made scarcely any sound on the soft earth. In a few moments he would see his little girl, his Rosemary —Kitty's baby!

An unusually warm August afternoon was drawing to a close. Chrissy and Rose had left April

in charge of Inn-You-Go and had gone out to the Point. April sat rearranging Miss Manny's "happy" flowers. Suddenly conscious that someone approached up the path to the cottage, she lifted her head. Then she sprang to her feet, the flowers falling about her. Her breath caught, she flung out her hands.

"Toto—Toto—*oh, Toto!*" With a cry she flung herself into Toto's arms, buried her face on his shoulder, her hands clinging tightly about his neck.

April, child—*you* here!" The man paled, as though from a great shock. "My dear, *my dear,* I thought you were—dead!"

"Dead?" April flung herself out of his arms that she might see his face. Her own was aglow.

He held her out at arm's-length.

"What terrible mistake has been made, April? Am I losing my senses? I have mourned so for you! I came here to find—"

April's face clouded. She looked like a happy child who had been rebuked for her joy.

"Aren't you glad to find me?" she burst out. *"I* knew, I knew you'd come!"

"Of course I am glad to find you. But April, a letter came from Boston, over a year ago, telling me that both Queenie and you—had died—of fever. The woman with whom you had been boarding wrote to me."

"Oh-h!" April's eyes opened wide in horror. "The wicked, wicked creature! Then she never sent my telegram—after Queenie died. I begged you to come."

"No, child, I only got her letter. I thought there was no use going, then. It was a dreadful shock."

"How—*awful*—in—her!" April shuddered. "After Queenie died she tried to keep me—she was going to lock me up and make we work. I heard her say something about its being cheaper than paying somebody. And I ran away. I came—here.

"What a curious coincidence," murmured Toto.

"But I knew you'd come, sometime," finished April, triumphantly, determined to let no shadow of that past horror dim the brightness of her moment. "And you'll take me back with you—me and Gullfaxi?"

Toto patted her hand. "We'll talk about that later. Are you alone—here?" His eyes swept, hungrily, the front of the little cottage. "Can we sit down here and talk?"

"Miss Leila's gone to Kennebunk and Chrissy and Rose are out on the Point. They're dears, 'specially Rose. I live with Miss Manny, but we're here at Windover 'most of the time." There was so much to tell Toto that April did not know where to begin. She pulled him to one of the chairs under the apple trees.

"And that's why you didn't come sooner," laughed April. "I've dreamed lots of time of finding you. I wondered where and when it would be. But I always knew it would happen. That wicked, dreadful woman— But," she suddenly stared, "If you thought I was dead, how did you know I was here?"

"April, dear, it has been the most fortunate coincidence that I have found you. I came here seeking Rosemary."

"Rosemary? Rosemary who? Do you mean *my* Rose—Rose Meredith?"

"April, think very hard. Can you remember anyone—a little playmate, whom you called Rosemary?

For a moment April sat in deep silence. Then she shook her head. Queenie and Toto had been careful to blot out that baby memory.

"N—no. Why, Toto?"

"Rosemary was my little girl. When you were both babies you lived together on a farm in New York State. Then Queenie brought—you—back to us."

"And what became of *your* little girl? Why didn't you ever tell me you had a little girl? Did she die, Toto?"

"No. She is your Rose Meredith."

April could not believe this. Toto told the story

from the beginning, of how he had given his baby girl over into his brother's keeping and had allowed his world to think that he was dead.

"You know me only as Toto Conge, April. I am Alfred Meredith."

"But why did you let her go?" demanded April.

Toto shook his head. "I thought it was—for her good. Now, I wonder—"

"How *could* you?" accused April. "Your very own little girl." Then, suddenly, it came to her that Toto's Rose and *her* Rose were one and the same. "But, oh, how grand to have Rose really, truly belong to us!" Not for an instant was April jealous. "And won't she be happy when she knows you are her real, true father? Toto, there she comes, now! Rose! *Rose!*"

Toto sprang to his feet. He trembled, violently. At April's call a slender girl hastened over the green field. She was bareheaded and the afternoon sun turned to burnished gold the loosened ends of her red hair. Though Toto's eyes were suddenly wet he made out clearly the pretty features. Even in his great joy he felt a wrench of disappointment that Rosemary, grown, did not look like his Kitty—

April rushed to meet her. She caught her arm with both hands and dragged her forward.

"Rose, Rose—the most *wonderful* thing has happened! He's your *father!* He wasn't lost at sea—

they just made that up. He's really Alfred Meredith. But he's Toto, too—my Toto—I've always known him—Toto Conge, the best clown who ever lived—"

Rose stopped short. Her startled eyes changed from wonder, unbelief, to horror. Toto stepped slowly toward her.

"Tell her, Toto—tell her it is true!" cried April.

"It is true, my little girl." His voice was pleading. "I am your father, Alfred Meredith." He reached out his hand and touched one of hers, gently. "It is a long story, darling, I—"

But Rose, stung to life by his touch, drew back with a shudder. She covered her face with her hands.

"No! *No!* It is *not* true! It *can't* be true. *Not a clown!* Oh, *why* did you come? I won't *let* it be true. Go away. *Go away!* I don't want to—see you!" And with a convulsive cry she ran into the cottage and hid herself in Miss Leila's room.

With blazing eyes April stared at the door through which Rose had fled. Her face flushed an angry red. She opened her lips to speak, then stood silent before Toto's suffering.

"Don't call her." He had read April's intent. "My brother said she—might—feel like that!" His voice sounded strange, far-off. His shoulders drooped, wearily. "I had no right to try—to come back. I should never have let her know." He sank into a chair.

April flung herself on her knees beside him. She clung to him.

"Oh, how could she? How *could* she? How *dared* she be ashamed of you? I hate her. I just *hate* her. Let's go back, Toto."

He smoothed April's bent head. "Hush, child, don't cry. Yes—let us go away—somewhere." He reached, blindly, for his hat.

"Quick—*quick!*" begged April. She could not bear to stay another moment at Windover. She slipped her hand under Toto's arm and led him down the path. Neither tried to speak.

On the road to Miss Manny's, though, April paused. She could not take her Toto to Miss Manny's and risk his being hurt again—expose him to the scorn of Miss Manny's prejudice!

"Toto, we'll have to go to Michael Brown's."

CHAPTER XXIV

At the Rectory

April waited in the Rectory garden for Toto to come out of Michael Brown's study. She sat in the old arbor where, through the open window of the house she could see the outline of Toto's head. She resented their shutting her out of their council. Toto was hers—it did not make the least bit of difference what Michael Brown said to him. Rose did not want him; Toto was hers. She would go back with him.

She paid no heed to the song of a thrush from the cloister of the quiet graveyard, nearby. Racing through her mind went memories of Toto, doing this, Toto, doing that. If Rose could have seen him that day when the little boy was hurt by an unruly elephant—how he had lifted the child and carried him out and had stayed with him at the hospital while the doctors took stitches in the torn flesh! It had been a dirty, little street urchin, too, who had crawled under the canvas. If Rose could only know how everyone in the show had always loved Toto! They had often quarreled among themselves, but not one of them ever quarreled with Toto. And Toto looked so nice when he was dressed up in his smooth, silky, black

dress-suit; quite as nice as anyone Rose knew! If Rose could have seen the crowd of school children, in St. Louis break through the police lines to welcome Toto, pressing and jostling one another to get close enough to speak to him or touch his hand. Wasn't *that* something to be proud of? How dare she scorn Toto!

Suddenly Michael Brown and Toto stepped out through the long window. Though Toto's face had lost its stricken look, something that had always shone in his eyes was quite gone.

"April," he called.

Michael Brown left them alone. Toto stood for a moment on the grass-grown path and let his gaze sweep over the garden as though its peace and quiet and old-fashioned beauty were things he had never seen before.

"Toto, when are we going?" cried April, a dreadful fear seizing her.

"I am going back at once, child. This very splendid young man is going to drive me to Boston. I have never met anyone just like him—"

"But I am going with you!"

Toto put his arm aross April's shoulders. "April child, I think, somewhere in Heaven, Queenie is watching you and is very happy because her greatest wish has come true. Even when you were a baby she dreamed of your growing to womanhood out of the

ring. That meant more to her than anything else—she sacrificed everything to make it come true. She worked hard, too. She could have made her own life easier by putting you into the performances, but she would not do it. Your Michael Brown has told me of Miss Manny, and Miss Lightwood and your other friends. And this is a lovely spot. Queenie must be very content—now. And you have grown so much! You're such a fine, straight-limbed girl. Pretty, too.

"Toto!" wailed April.

"Let's walk up and down this path, child." April could not know with what an effort Toto was keeping his self-control. "I am not going to forget you. We'll stick by one another, April. But I want you to stay here, among these friends, a little longer. I want you to study and play and grow into the kind of a woman Queenie wanted. Then, when I'm very old and Bushman has laid me on the shelf you shall take care of Toto and make him happy—we'll play together." That was the dream he had had—oh, for such a short time—for his Rosemary.

April tried to speak but her lips trembled so that she could not shape her words. Toto went on: "Your Michael Brown is an unusual fellow. Anyone can trust him. I have asked him to act as a guardian over you—in a way. I don't like to interfere with your Miss Manny. And I shall send you money

from time to time. You must not be dependent upon these good people. I want to do it—for Queenie's sake. She was very good to me. And I shall never cease to regret that I was not there to help her at the —end. April child, don't cry! Tell me of those days in Boston. You see I knew nothing of them. When Queenie wrote she did not tell me things were bad."

April told her story haltingly, because so much of those months of Queenie's illness had been blotted out by the days in Blossom, at Miss Manny's and at Windover. But, bit by bit, it came back to her—the the worry of the first weeks, the horror of the last. Suddenly she stopped. She remembered something Queenie had said to her: "Tell Toto I've written—it's in my portfolio." Had it been about something important? She repeated it to Toto. And she told him how the Slavosky woman had stolen the portfolio and Queenie's clothes.

"I think—before I go back—I'll drop in and call on Mrs. Slavosky," Toto answered, grimly. "I'll have a reckoning with her—in justice to Queenie."

Michael Brown came around the corner of the house.

"Are you ready, Mr. Meredith? If we start now we can stop on the way and get a bite of supper. We'll make Boston easily—it's going to be a fine moonlight night. And, April, I've told Mrs.

Prowett that you will eat the nice chicken pie she has fixed for me."

Michael Brown made his tone cheery. And he knew Mrs. Prowett's chicken pie was exceptionally good, and that April might eat at the Rectory though she would not at Miss Manny's.

"Promise—*promise* me you won't—forget me," April begged, as she clung to Toto.

"Never, child, and by and by—" he promised. And he watched her go indoors to find Mrs. Prowett.

* * * * *

For miles Michael Brown and Toto drove along in deep silence. Though Michael Brown's attention was apparently upon the road his thoughts were on the tragedy of the man who sat beside him. And Toto was trying very hard not to think of Rosemary. Neither noticed a touring car which raced past them, nor that its passenger was Thomas Meredith.

Yielding to a restlessness he could not control, Thomas Meredith had taken a later train to Bostno, and then had hired a taxi to carry him on to Blossom. He told himself that he had been a coward to let Toto go to Blossom alone. He knew something of hte pride of his family. What if they should not welcome Toto?

Forest Hill was wrapped in a strange quiet. Mrs. Todd answered his summons. Chrissy was "some-

wheres," she said. Mrs. Car'line was upstairs. Miss Rose had gone to her room with a dreadful headache. "Wouldn't eat a bit of supper. Yes, there'd been a man stop and ask for Miss Rose but, no, he hadn't come back. Rose'd been alone when she'd come in." Yes, she'd find Miss Chrissy and she'd call Mrs. Car'line.

Pacing the floor of the big living room, Thomas Meredith gave way to an overwhelming disgust at his family. *They* had all failed, too; they were no better than he was. They, too, lived by false standards. By the time his wife, startled out of herself by his unexpected coming to Forest Hill, and Chrissy, with Miss Leila, appeared, he had worked himself into a state of mind that would tolerate nothing short of a clean confession of his own wrongdoing.

He left out no part of his story—he had as little mercy for his wife and daughter as he had for himself. In his self-abasement he was unconscious of the fact that Chrissy was watching him with startled, interested eyes, as though she was seeing the real Thomas Meredith, who was her father, for the first time. Then he told of Keith's finding Rose's father and of Rose's father coming to New York.

"Where's Rose?" he demanded, abruptly. "Bring her here."

Chrissy went after Rose and brought her into the strange family council.

"Where's your—father?" Thomas Meredith asked, without any greeting of any sort.

"I—don't—know." Rose's eyes were red with weeping. "I guess—he went away."

"You *sent* him away? You let him go? You probably thought he wasn't good enough because he—he had been a clown. Do you know what he has done? He knew everything—*everything,* how I'd used your money, forged your name, sent him false reports to deceive him—he could have put me in jail! And, instead, he has advanced me money to save me from ruin! For Keith's sake and Chrissy's he went on—*trusting* me! He's *that* kind of a man, this father you won't own. Why, not one of us is worthy to claim kinship with my brother."

"Tom, don't be hard on Rose," begged Miss Leila, putting an arm around the sobbing girl.

"No—don't be too hard on her! She didn't know any better. We've brought her up to be a snob. My brother sacrificed all the happiness of his life for *that.* Well, he's learned. Where is he?"

"Maybe he went—with April. She said something about his—being—her Toto."

"How *strange!* How very strange!" cried Miss Leila. "April's Toto is Alfred Meredith! She told me about him but I never guessed the truth. She did not know. Of course you will find him with April." She smiled as she pictured that reunion. What a

whirl of coincidences! Some joy, anyway, had resulted from Toto's coming back to his family.

"Shall I go there and get him?" asked Rose, with pathetic meekness.

No one offered to go with her. Instinctively each felt that the girl wanted the opportunity to make up to her father for her first scorn. And Chrissy wanted to ask a great many questions, too. Had Keith known that this stranger was his own uncle? And were all clowns really nice men under their ridiculous, clownish make-up? Her mind was struggling in its lightning readjustment.

A very terrible April confronted Rose on Miss Manny's porch. She had just returned from the Rectory. Her heart was very sore and bitter. But for Rose Toto would still be in Blossom, might always be there. She would not even wait to let Rose tell why she had come.

"He's gone," she snapped. "There's no need your saying anything more to him to make him any unhappier. You've broken his heart. You're a horrid, proud girl. I hate you! He'll never *never* come back. You've driven him away."

Rose shrank from April's anger. "April, *listen,*" she pleaded. But April flew into the house and slammed the door.

CHAPTER XXV

April's Storm

Wretched hours for everyone followed Toto's coming and going. April's world had now shut its door in her face. If Rose scorned Toto, then Chrissy must, too, and Keith, and even Miss Leila. There was no use trying to do any of the old, jolly things. It was as though a sharp knife had cut straight through her happiness. And, though Chrissy and Miss Leila pleaded with her to forgive Rose and go to Windover once more, April subbornly refused.

Deborah Manny looked upon Toto's coming as nothing less than a catastrophe. "With Aprilly just gettin' settled-like and steady and forgettin' her titivatin' ways it was too bad to have him come." But his going was a kind act of Providence. He had gone before a soul in Blossom knew anything about him; neither she nor April had been humiliated in Blossom eyes. That April's circus-man and Rose's father were one and the same was quite beyond Miss Manny's belief; that Rose had rebelled against the kinship, however, satisfied her with her own opinion on things in general and circus-folk in particular. "Of course a nice, pretty girl like Rose Meredith don't want truckin' with circus-folk!" However,

Miss Manny refrained, for which much credit must be given her, from expressing these convictions to Aprilly or to Michael Brown. Michael Brown had told her of his talk with Alfred Meredith, which had left him, in a sense, co-guardian with her over April. That Michael Brown had been tremendously impressed by this Toto-man, Miss Manny explained by a scornful: "Ministers are soft as jelly, anyways."

With each passing hour April's bitterness grew. And, too, a desire to escape, herself, from the prejudice which had sent Toto away. It would be very easy for her to go away; she now had her share in the profits of Inn-You-Go. That money would take her to Cleveland. The Bushman show was there. She would go to the manager; she remembered him; she would tell him that she would work very hard. Toto had said she was pretty. After the manager had taken her she would tell Toto why she couldn't stay in Blossom, where everyone despised circus-people. Toto must understand. If circus-people were not good enough for the Merediths and the Lees and the Sneeds and all the other Blossom folk, well, then, *she* was not good enough, either, for she was of the circus—Queenie's child. The well-known bareback rider! When her thoughts got this far, April's chin went up. Toto *must* understand; he would be glad she had come back.

On the third day after Toto's visit April took

definite steps toward flight. She secreted the old brown bag under her bed. At surreptitious moments she packed it, careful to put into it only the little she might need for her journey. She found, though, that her preparations did not bring her all the comfort she had expected, that the thought of leaving Blossom and her pleasant life here made her heart heavy. She wished she dared just say good-by to Miss Manny—Miss Manny had been very nice to her, in her queer way. And she loved the funny, prim old house; she might never see it again—

After the noonday meal was over and cleared away, Miss Manny, not sensing the torment behind the girl's troubled eyes, told April that she was "just goin' down to the Newberrys to get some of Myra Newberry's home-made ointment. Ain't nothin' like it for my neuralgy." In answer April ran to her, impulsively. *Who* would rub the ointment on Miss Manny's poor shoulders if she went away? "Oh, Miss Manny—just let me kiss you!" she cried, with a guilty catch at her heart. And she pressed soft lips against the old woman's wrinkled cheek.

"Well, I swan to *goodness,*" ejaculated Miss Manny, staring, and wondering if "Aprilly's upsetness" had gone to her head! But April, laughing tremulously, pushed her away. "Go along, you dear thing," she said aloud. To herself: "Now I can go. Now I can go."

Half-an-hour later she tiptoed softly through the door; with a fast beating heart she closed it behind her and turned down the path toward the gate.

"Good-by, dear old trees. Good-by, pretty flowers. Good-by, *everything,*" she whispered, overcome by a wave of tenderness. Then she shut the gate and turned resolutely toward the station. There was plenty of time to walk there. Then she would buy her ticket and sit in a corner until the train came in.

Few ever took the afternoon train to Boston. She was quite alone on the station road. And she was very unhappy. The dust choked her, the hot sun beat down upon her, her bag grew more and more heavy. The distance, as she pressed on, seemed endless.

Suddenly she was startled by the throb of a motor behind her. She drew into the deep grass by the side of the road to let it pass. But, with a quick grind of brakes, it stopped short alongside of her. Michael Brown leaned from the driver's seat.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, in surprise. His glance dropped to the old bag. "April,—" April flushed. "I'm going—away. To—to—"

Michael Brown jumped from the car. Without a word he took the bag. "Get in, April. We'll talk this over." He nodded to the car. "I'll turn around."

April's eyes blazed. "I *won't* get in. I'm going. You haven't any right—give me my bag!"

"We can talk this over and you'll still have time to catch the train. Unless you act like a naughty child, now." Michael Brown's face was stern. April hesitated a moment, then climbed into the car. He threw in the bag, sprang into his seat, pulled and pushed the gear and the car swung back into the road toward Blossom.

"*Now!*" he turned and looked at her, his glance softening. "Were you running away without a word to me?"

April stared straight ahead. "You wouldn't have let me go," she muttered. "And I won't stay."

"Has anything happened since—Toto was here?" He used the name she loved.

"N-no. But I can't bear to think—"

"So you're planning to do something which will hurt Toto even more. April, it comforts Toto to know that you are here in Blossom." Michael Brown slowed down the car. "He told me a lot about your mother, how she wanted to have her little girl grow up out of the ring. She lived for that dream. And Toto helped her. He told me how time and again he stood between her and the manager, and the company, too. They all wanted you. And with all his other work he taught you. And he felt so proud to find you such a fine, happy girl. He wants you to go to school and to college. Queenie never had much schooling, he said, but she knew the possibilities it

opens to any girl. That is why she wanted it for you. April, are you going to throw away his hopes —*their* hopes?"

April turned her face away. "But I don't want to stay *here*. They all think I'm not good enough—"

"April, isn't it, after all, your own pride that is tormenting you? Have you no trust at all in the friendship which Miss Leila and the girls have given you? In Miss Manny's affection? In—*mine?*" He laid his hand over hers. Don't you think it's just for yourself? Have you given us a chance to prove that to you? Aren't you running away just because you are afraid?"

"I don't *want* you to talk to me like that," cried April. "I—I want to go. I'll never, never forgive Rose. Never."

"Not if I tell you that Toto has forgiven her? Poor Rose, she is suffering because of what she has done. She could not help it—she was not given time to adjust herself. She did not know her—father as you know him. Come, we're back at Miss Manny's. What do you say—shall I hustle this bag in and out of sight or—shall I take you back to the station?" He put his hand under her chin and turned her face so that her stormy glance met his.

"I'll—I'll stay. But I don't *want* to. You are horrid to—to ask me to. I don't ever want to —*see* you again."

Ignoring his proffered hand, she jumped to the ground and ran up the path. He followed with the bag. He found her in Miss Manny's rocker, her head buried in her outflung arms. Her attitude of childish abandonment touched him. Impulsively, he laid a caressing hand on her shoulder.

"April dear, I know that someday you will be very glad you decided to stay. And you must never run away again without—trusting me. Toto left you in my charge, you know."

With a quick movement April threw off his hand. She lifted her head. Her eyes were quite dry and very bright; her cheeks were aflame.

"I won't have you talk to me as though I was a little girl! I'm grown-up now, and I can take care of myself. I'm not staying a *bit* because you make me. I—I—" Her angry voice faltered before the hurt in his eyes. "Oh—*go away!* I'll stay to make Toto happy, but *I* shall never, never be happy again!"

CHAPTER XXVI

Rosemary

Toto had no trouble in finding No. 80 Fleming Street. It was worse than he had imagined. With something akin to horror, he pictured poor Queenie there. Regret overwhelmed him because, through no fault of his own he had failed her in her one great hour of need.

In response to his knock Mrs. Slavosky's cruel little eyes peered suspiciously through a slit in the door. But when one had rooms to let one did not refuse to admit a possible lodger!

And Toto had his reckoning with her, though, all the while he was questioning her, he was thinking sadly that nothing he could say or do could make up to poor Queenie for what she had endured. He did not think of April. He had taken no one to Fleming Street with him; he had little hope of recovering any of Queenie's belongings.

Surprised before his accusations the woman's cunning for once failed her. She tried, frantically, to frame a story, but under Toto's stern eyes her tongue faltered. Then, in the fashion of her craven sort, she flung herself on his mercy. The woman he called Mrs. Dangerfield had left nothing except a few

old "duds" and an old writing portfolio with a little money in it. The money had not been enough to pay the rent owing to her for the back room. And she had used it to bury Mrs. Dangerfield. The girl—well, she'd run away, she didn't know where. Mrs. Slavosky said she was frightened, then, and had written Toto saying that the girl was dead, too. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and watched Toto furtively. Did he have a badge under his coat? The only thing Mrs. Slavosky was afraid of was a policeman.

She hastend to tell Toto that the old folio was in her attic. She had meant to destroy it, but had held back through some superstition. There was nothing in it, she said, but some old letters. She had not even read them—a dead woman's letters! Not her!

Toto was too sick at heart to want to turn Mrs. Slavosky over to the law. Why let the world, which had acclaimed La Belle Queen in the glory of her art, know of her ignominious passing, alone, friendless, in squalid surroundings. So he told Mrs. Slavosky that, for the return of the portfolio and the letters it contained, he would leave her without another word.

Back in his room at the hotel, Toto examined the contents of the old portfolio. There still lingered about the faded plush covers and about the letters something of the delicate perfume which Queenie, in her better days, had always used. It brought her

vividly before him. And he pictured her as she had been when his Kitty was with them. A great loneliness wrenched his heart.

* * * * *

Miss Manny, returning from the Newberry's, was startled to meet a stranger at her gate. He lifted his hat, called her "Miss Manny," and asked if April was within the house.

"I am Toto Conge," he explained, whereupon, figuratively speaking, the ground slipped out from under Deborah Manny's feet. Face to face with a *clown*—and she found herself saying: "Do come right in. Aprilly's likely as not to home 'cause she's stayin' away from that Inn-whatever-they-call-it." But, then, Toto had smiled at Miss Manny. "And Aprilly will be as s'prised as can be."

At this moment April, hearing voices, opened the door. With a little gasp she stared at Toto, not believing her own eyes. Then she rushed into his arms.

"You've come back for me. *Oh,* you've come back for me!"

"I have most astonishing things to tell you, April." Gently he pushed her back. April, looking at him, realized that this was not the Toto who had left her; some fire within him had sprung into flame. It shone in his eyes, in his smile. His voice trembled, as though he were suppressing some great emotion.

"May I sit down here? He indicated Miss Manny's old rocker.

Miss Manny made a move as though to leave him alone with April, but he held up his hand. "No, Miss Manny, stay with us, please. You will be interested in what I am going to show April. Come close beside me, child. He opened his bag and took from it the old portfolio.

"Queenie's!" cried April, delightedly. "You got it! Then you saw that dreadful woman--"

"Yes, I saw her. Some other time I will tell you of my visit. For the present it is enough that she returned this folio—and the letters, undisturbed. She stole Queenie's money and her clothes, but refrained, because of some superstition, from even so much as reading the letters—"

In Toto's manner there was such great excitement that April and Miss Manny, silent with expectancy, stared at him. He drew out an envelope and placed it in April's hands.

"I want you to read it—aloud, April. Slowly." Then he leaned back in the old rocker.

April bent close to the sheets. The familiar scrawl, the delicate perfume, brought a mist to her eyes. Her voice faltered over the words.

"* * * Little April don't know, Toto, but I guess my end is near. I've tried to fight it off. I don't want to die. I want to live, anyways, until

you come back, so I can tell you all about it. I can't tell April. It'd kill me the way she'd look at me. You'll understand, Toto. You know poor Queenie and how much I cared for that baby of mine. That was what made me do it. Just like you wanted Rosemary I wanted my baby to grow up out of the ring like other girls into a fine lady. Only I wanted it more than you did, Toto, because I'm a mother and mothers want things more. And I didn't have any other way, Toto. When I got your letter telling me you was going to have someone call for Rosemary and take her away I got the idea. It looked so easy, Toto. You hadn't seen the kids for two years, and they were as like as two little flowers with their red curls and their big blue eyes. You'd never see Rosemary again, you said, and no one else had seen her and no one knew what we had said. Don't you see how easy it was, Toto? I couldn't help it, Toto. I told Mrs. Houck she could go to town and I'd take care of the babies and she trusted me like you did, Toto. And when your messenger came, Toto, it was *so* easy. I gave *my* baby instead of *yours*. *My* baby went away to go to school and grow up to be a fine lady and not to know the ring. *My* baby. And it was yours I brought back with me to the show. Toto even when you was so unsuspecting I couldn't be ashamed. But I always tried to be a good mother to your kid, as good as if she was my own, and I

swore to God I'd never let her go into the ring, and and I didn't, did I? And when she looked so sweet and pretty and the whole show made such a fuss over her sometimes I wanted to tell you she was your Rosemary and not my April. * * I'm not sorry I did it. But if I'm going to quit you've got to know. You won't hate poor Queenie, will you? I loved my baby so, and when you told of the nice school where they'd bring her up like a real lady I couldn't help it. And I've tried to make it up to your kid, and I was going to quit the ring, anyway, someday. If you don't believe me when you read this you look for that funny little three-cornered mark on her left shoulder that your Rosemary was born with * * * You'll fix things, Toto. The nights are so long now and I can't sleep. I'm not afraid to die, but I'm wondering about facing Kitty * * *"

April let the pages slip to the floor. She stared stupidly at Toto. Miss Manny, her hands clapped to her head as though to steady its whirling, was softly exclaiming: "I swan. I swan."

"Then—I'm—not—" began April, bewildered.

Toto sprang to his feet. "Take off that blouse!" he commanded, in a sharp, agitated voice. He stood over her while she bared her slim shoulder. There, blue against the white of her skin, was a small, three-cornered birthmark.

April looked down at it, then lifted wondering

eyes to Toto's face. "Am *I* your Rosemary?" she asked slowly. This revelation was too wonderful to believe all at once. "Your—"

Just for a moment Toto, with a convulsive movement, covered his face. Then he caught April and swept her into his arms. He caressed her bright head, holding her very close.

"Kitty's girl," he murmured over and over, a great sob choking his voice.

CHAPTER XXVII

Out of the Ring

Neither Toto nor April had any thought of revenge when they took Queenie's letter to Forest Hill. Indeed, Toto's kind heart shrank from the blow he knew it must inflict upon poor Rose. But the truth had to be established once and for all; after that he and April would do all that they could to help Rose.

Chrissy's unaffectedly glad welcome to April and Toto was only a degree more cordial than her mother's; both had been deeply impressed by Toto's generosity. And Chrissy loudly rejoiced at having April "make up," for without her, she declared, imminent failure threatened Inn-You-Go.

But a deep silence followed the reading of the letter. All eyes turned upon Rose. Toto spoke quickly, in a voice which faltered with emotion.

"Not one of you must blame Queenie. I, whom she hurt more than anyone else, do not blame her. You see—I knew her. She was good to me; she was good to—April. She did what she did because of a hunger in her heart for things she had never had and wanted, and she wanted them for her—baby. I am to blame for the whole tangle; I had no right to send

my own child away as I did. I wish you had known Queenie Dangerfield—she was a good woman."

Toto's appeal went straight to Rose's heavy heart. This Queenie who was really her mother—she shivered at the strange thought—had done this unbelievable thing for her that she might grow up to be a "fine lady." She must not fall short, now, of what Queenie had wanted. So, her face very white, but her eyes dark with feeling, she stepped up to Toto.

"I'm sorry I was so proud and horrid the other day. Of course, now, it doesn't matter, but I'm sorry just the same. And may I please have that letter to keep? It's all I have, anyway—about her. And maybe, someday, it'll help me to—to—"

Something very brave in Rose's effort touched Alfred Meredith deeply. He took the girl in his arms and gently patted her shoulder while she struggled to keep her control.

"Child," his voice dropped so that it shut out the others. "There are two things of which Queenie Dangerfield had more than most people—kindness and courage. I will tell you a great deal more of her someday that will make you love her. And remember how very much she loved you. I promised once, that I would always be a guardian to her girl. So, you see, you belong to me, too." He looked over her shoulder at the sun-lit room with its home-like

luxuries, at the interested faces about them. Queenie has her wish," he added, softly. "You have never known—you will never know the ring as she knew it—its ceaseless struggles, its dangers, its pitiless demands—its apartness."

With a sudden exclamation April broke the tenseness of the moment. "Am I Rosemary now and is Rose April?" she demanded, breathlessly. "I shall never, *never* learn to answer to anything but Aprilly!"

Toto, with the others, laughed at her tragic dismay. "I think you will have to always be April," he decided. "You are too like the name to ever be anything else."

"And Rose Rose," she added, as though it must be definitely settled.

"And you're my cousin—and Keith's," exclaimed Chrissy, thinking it all very exciting and much like a play. "Does Keith know yet that the man he met in the hotel out there was his very own uncle? And won't he be surprised to know about April? Can I tell him, April? And all about how you grew up with a circus? *That's* why you could ride bareback. Why wouldn't you tell us?"

April had to explain, then, her promise to Miss Manny. She described her flight from Fleming Street, too.

"Miss Manny thinks circus people are wicked,"

she added, with a heightened color. Then she flashed a smile at Toto. But she won't any more because, you see, she has met Toto. She made us promise to come back as quickly as ever we could, and she's going to open a jar of gooseberry preserve, and you all know what *that* means to Miss Manny. And she told us to bring "the young ones and the writer woman, too," she added laughingly.

"Let's go to Windover and get Miss Leila now," cried Chrissy. For a moment Rose hung back, then April, noticing her hesitation, caught her hand and dragged her off. Toto watching them as they ran down the path through the beech trees, thought of Queenie's words, "As alike as two flowers growing in a garden together." Alike, and yet very unlike—

He turned to catch Mrs. Meredith watching him with serious eyes.

"We have much to thank you for, Alfred," she began awkwardly. "More than I can—"

"Oh, don't—please—"

"I must. For I can say to you what I cannot to Tom. You've given Tom another chance. And you've given *me* another chance. I shall try and help him now and Chrissy will—we've always dragged him down. I can't tell you what it means—how good you have been." The poor lady fumbled for her handkerchief.

"Why, Caroline, it wasn't much to do—and it's

made up to me a little for the years of loneliness I've had. I tell you there's nothing on earth like having someone belonging to you—youngsters, too," and he smiled whimsically in the direction the girls had taken.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At Windover Point

Not since the wreck of the Sally Ann, on the Devil's Reef, had Blossom had so much to talk about! His load of fish spoiling in the sun, Jeremy hung over gateposts and told and retold how "he'd been the fust to see the little feller who was Aprilly's Pa when she hadn't any suspicion she had a Pa, and him one of the biggest circus clowns livin' and Tom Meredith's brother all the time." Jeremy hinted, too, at his fabulous wealth, beyond all humble reckoning. Some scouted such a possibility, others speculated as to whether Aprilly's Pa would take her away, or, maybe, come himself to Blossom to live.

During the next few days Miss Manny, suffering a great deal from excitement and the secret fear that "Aprilly's Pa" *might* take her away, a fear strengthened by long consultations at Forest Hill, in which she had no share, baked enough pies and cakes to feed the whole town. The poor woman's surrender to Toto was beautifully complete. She had sat for hours, an absorbed listener, while he answered April's countless questions concerning this one and that one of the "show" family. The barriers down, April talked incessantly of her old friends. "Of course," Miss

Manny said to Mrs. Sneed at the Emporium (and her words were carried into as many homes as there were listeners in the little store) "circusin' ain't much in my line, but art's art one way or 'nother, and I don't know that it's a bit worse than makin' believe waxed flowers is real flowers. And clown or no clown, Aprilly's Pa's a real gentleman, or Debory Manny never see one."

There was one tiny cloud in April's great joy—she had not seen Michael Brown since the afternoon she had so childishly sent him away. And she wanted so much to pour out to him all the wonderful plans that were forming in such magic fashion. Was he just staying away to show her that he thought her childish? As she walked alone on Windover she frowned at such a suggestion. Well, she didn't care—now. She had Toto. She was Toto's. Michael Brown could forget all about her—he would probably fall in love with Miss Leila as Chrissy had forseen.

Tempted by their cool shelter, April snuggled among the high rocks at the edge of the Point. The tide was coming in. Below her the sea-green water eddied and swirled, lapping the rocks with a sleepy music. Scarcely conscious that she did so, April began to sing softly—one of Miss Manny's hymns. The sound floated back to Michael Brown as he came across the Point, and quickened his steps.

To announce his coming he sent a loose stone

hurtling over the girl's head into the green water. "Oh, goodness," she cried, lifting a startled, laughing face. He jumped down to her hiding place.

"May I? Your song gave you away. I haven't seen you for so long that I ought to wait for an introduction."

April moved invitingly to one side to make room for him. Her smile betrayed her delight at his coming.

"I thought you were trying to punish me for—running away. You ought to know how I've wanted to see you to tell you everything that has happened. Oh, *so* much."

"I went to a wedding in Portland. By the way, I gave that little locket to the bride and I told her about Inn-You-Go and you girls. They're going to stop off here on their way back to Portland."

"Oh-h!" cried April, turning suddenly rose-red. "Then you didn't—"

"But I hadn't been back an hour before Jeremy told me of all that has happened. And your father called on me this morning. April, dear, I am tremendously happy that everything has turned out as it has."

"But did he tell you *everything?*" demanded April, excitedly. "There's so much that I have to sit tight still and make myself believe it's all true. It's like a fairy story, or—or as though a magic wand

had waved over my head. Everytime I look at Toto I want to hug him, so's to feel him, and I whisper 'Father! Father!' It's *so* beautiful and strange. And he's been telling me about my own little mother. We're going to buy Windover. It's going to be ours forever and ever, ghosts and all, though there really aren't ghosts, you know, they're just wind voices. We're going to live there soon's Miss Leila goes away. Only I'll be in school most of the time. I'm going back with Chrissy and Rose to Oakdale. Then I'm going to college. And then Toto and I are going way around the world—everywhere. And Rose has promised that she'll live with us—part of the time. And, oh, Toto has bought Gullfaxi. He belonged to the show, once, and we—Toto and I, can't bear to have him working, now he's old. There, isn't that a *lot* to happen all at once?"

Michael Brown was intently watching the eager face. He recalled that first time he had seen it—in his wardrobe. It had changed since then. Suddenly he realized April was older—spirited still, but not the "wildy" thing of those first weeks of her stay in Blossom.

"Yes, that is a lot to happen all at once. Fairies *have* been here, I think. And I'm not your guardian, anymore." He assumed deep regret. "Who's going to take care of you after this, when the April-storms blow up?"

April flushed. "I'm sorry I told you to—go away. And that I never wanted to see you again. I didn't mean it. Miss Manny says tongues are the Old Harry's pitchforks. I guess mine is, for it always gets away from me. But someday I'll learn everything." She let her eyes turn, in dreamy contemplation, to the green-blue stretch of water before them. "Oh, there's *so* much I want to learn."

Michael Brown lifted her small hand from the rock on which it rested. He counted off on her fingers.

"One year—at Oakdale. Another—at college, and another, and another—" Suddenly he noticed the small seal ring on her little finger. He recognized it as one Keith had always worn. He frowned.

"Isn't that Keith's?"

A deep flush crimsoned April's cheeks. She pulled her hand away and sat on it.

"Yes—it's—Keith's. I—I wear it—he asked me—"

"Why, that's all right, my dear." Her confusion annoyed him. "Only I—well, Keith's a nice boy. But never forget that you have ahead of you six very happy years of girlhood, and don't let Keith, or anyone else, cheat you of one hour of them. I'm off now—good-bye, little April." There was an absurd seriousness in his tone—a curious hint of disappointment. He had jumped to his feet, as he spoke,

so that April could not answer. "I'm going home by the Cove, I think. I like the exercise and the excitement of jumping the shallows." Whereupon he made a leap to the rocks below and disappeared around a jutting headland.

An amazing, puzzling anger swept April—whether at herself or Michael Brown or poor, defenseless Keith she did not know. Why had she not told him she only wore the little ring because she felt so grateful to Keith for finding Toto? And why had he spoken in that queer, half-angry tone? And why had he left her so abruptly?

Impulsively she tore the little ring from her finger and flung it away. It fell into a mossy crevice in the rocks below—just a little above tide mark.

And he was not going to marry Miss Leila! He had given the little locket to some one else. Chrissy had been wrong. Oh, she was so glad, so *very* glad, that she felt a curious singing within her. Then she covered her face that she might shut out the green-blue water and the cloudless sky, everything—except the memory of that queer, disappointed look in Michael Brown's eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX

April's Sunshine

On a June afternoon two young women impatiently paced the small platform of the Blossom station. There was about them an air of festive excitement, as though the day and the hour stood out from all its fellows. They nodded to others who were waiting for the train from Boston, and their smiling faces seemed to say: "*You* know April's coming, don't you?"

"Do you think April will be changed?" asked Rose, in a moment's alarm. "Two years are so dreadfully long!"

"April changed? Of course not," cried Chrissy. Then, more seriously: "We're the ones who have changed, Rose. And April will notice it because she's been traveling around having a good time while we've been working."

"But we've written to her about everything we're doing."

"Oh, letters aren't the same as *seeing* people. When I look at you I can't believe that you're the little jump-at-a-mouse who came out of that Tarrytown school. And you're Mrs. Stuyvesant Battle's secretary! April won't know from anything you've

written to her how many wanted that position, and how Mrs. Battle picked you out of the whole bunch. And I'm sure I haven't even hinted at my own desperate struggles," laughed Chrissy, with a modesty she had not known in her girlhood days.

"You're wonderful, Chris." And Rose turned adoring eyes upon her companion. "The way you've persisted and gone ahead. I cut your picture out of the *Times* to show April. And we'll take her as soon as ever we can to see your collection in the Mercer Galleries."

"Rose—*there's the whistle!*"

On the Boston train, her nose flattened in childish fashion against the smudgy window, April watched, with fast-beating heart, for the first glimpse of Blossom. Dear old Blossom—how very long ago seemed that day when she and Toto had closed Windover and started on their travels. And how very long ago that other afternoon when she, a desolate little girl, had traveled to Blossom for the first time on this very train. Most certainly her good fairies had journeyed with her! She suddenly reached out for Toto's hand. It was so wonderful to feel that that horror of loneliness could never, never come again!

"Toto," she cried, suddenly, "Am I changed? Will the girls think I'm different? Am I dreadfully grown-up?"

Alfred Meredith studied her eager face with pre-

tended seriousness. "N-no. I can't say, honestly, that you seem at all grown-up. But if your friends think so I'll tell them of a few pranks you've committed in the last few months—"

Don't you dare! Oh, Toto, we're *there!* See, that's old Timothy Hawkin's barn. Oh, oh, isn't it grand to go home? Toto, isn't it *wonderful* to have a jolly, cosy, wee home to go home to?"

April was the first to alight from the train. She did not wait for it to stop. In a flash she had her arms about her friends, trying vainly to embrace them both at once. Her eyes swept the platform; her smile included every familiar face. But where was Keith? And where was Michael Brown? And where was Miss Manny? And where was Jeremy?

Keith had not come to the station. Chrissy explained some vague reason, and the tiniest frown puckered April's brow. Miss Manny was waiting for them at Windover. And Michael Brown—neither Chrissy nor Rose knew where he was. And poor old Jeremy was dead.

"Oh, well, it's just wonderful seeing you two old girls. Doesn't Toto look splendid? Oh, I have *so* much to tell you! And so much to ask you. How great you both look. You're not a bit different. Am I?"

Rose and Chrissy, in one voice, declared she had not changed in the slightest, at which April flashed an

impudent challenge at Toto. Chrissy led the way to a smart little touring car. Rose whispered to April that it was Chrissy's own car—bought for her "work."

"And Blossom's just the same, too. Oh, there's Mrs. Lee!" April leaned out of the car to wave a happy greeting. "And there's Miss Manny's—the darling, old, shut-up house. And, oh, *what* has happened to St. Stephen's? How *beautiful!*" April stared at the pile of gray stone which replaced the old church. "It's like some dear old-world chapel."

"Miss Leila gave it to Blossom—and to Michael Brown," explained Chrissy. "It's just finished, though it looks as though it had always been there, doesn't it? Isn't that just the sort of thing Leila Lightwood would do? Michael Brown refused a call from a parish in Boston, and she said that if he wouldn't leave Blossom he must have a church here that looked like the sort of religion he preached. And doesn't it? It's so simple—and yet perfect. People come from all over to look at it. Mother thinks Leila's crazy to spend her money the way she does, but Leila says it's her shrine, and she's going to make pilgrimages to it. *I'd* like to be married in it."

Over her shoulder April studied the little church. Absurdly, at this moment, Chrissy's old suggestion concerning Michael Brown and Miss Leila returned

to her, and with it the old, unreasonable jealousy. Miss Leila had met them when their boat docked in New York, they had spent the day with her and she had said nothing of her "shrine."

Miss Manny met them on the path to Windover. She had spent days in loving toil, airing the little house, weeding the flowerbeds, arranging "real" flowers on the old shelf over the fireplace, the pine table, the deep window ledges. The little cottage had never looked more "ship-shape," even in the days of Mistress Priscilla Blossom. And the wind-voices, which for generations, had been the ghosts of Windover, shrilled a welcome down the old chimney. A few apple blossoms lingered on the trees; more carpeted the ground. Over everything was the soft green of the spring. And beyond, like a staunch sentinel, still stood the old Lighthouse.

Miss Manny had tea ready for the travelers and —gooseberry preserve! Then they all sat under the apple trees and tried, in a very few minutes, to cover the experiences of the two years.

"Girls," cried April, suddenly, "I am downright ashamed of myself when I see how far ahead of me you two have gone! You're both established—as we used to say in college, Chris. I've heard such wonderful things of your work. Miss Leila told me. Do you suppose your success as an art collector grew out of our dear Inn-You-Go? And, now, please,

will you tell me just what *I* am to become? Because, I'll bravely confess it, in spite of the efforts of those poor professors at college I don't seem to be proficient in anything. I'm afraid," she smiled archly at Miss Manny, "I can't even turn a somersault on a horse's back, anymore!"

"There's a sight to do in this old house," Miss Manny hastened to assure her, "that's just waitin' for hands that can do it. 'Tain't fit for real folks to live in."

"Oh, it's—*beautiful!*" rebuked April, with a happy sigh.

When the girls had gone back to Forest Hill April left Toto to examine the cottage under Miss Manny's critical direction, and ran out on the Point. She could not believe she was at Windover until she had raced its length, had felt the sea-wind whip against her cheeks. Flushed, disheveled, happier than she had ever been in her whole life, she dropped down into the familiar nook in the rocks at the edge of the Point.

She recalled, with a thrill at being back among them, the jolly picnics they had had among these old rocks, the happy hours when they had lolled, with girlish abandon, in the warmth of the sun, reveling in their aloofness from all the world. And another afternoon came, with disturbing vividness, to her mind, when Michael Brown had found her there,

had talked to her so strangely and then had gone away.

April clasped her arms about her knees and rested her small chin upon them. Her eyes, as they stared out across the water, were dark with feeling. She had had her "six happy years of girlhood." And, oh, they *had* been happy years! And now—she must meet Keith and give him his answer.

At the thought a tiny, inward voice, which had bothered her much of late, rebelled stormily. *Was* Keith the dear lover of her dreams—the one who must come, someday, and stand before her and, with tender passion, claim her? With Keith—they knew each other so well—there would be no delightful discovering of hidden qualities and dear weaknesses, or funny little faults to be understood and forgiven, that quest which must, April thought, make an engagement so precious, so intimate, so enduring. She would always know just how he would look at all times, what he would say, what he would think about everything—what he liked to *eat*. He always wore greenish or brownish neckties, and hated mayonnaise dressing and loathed people reading aloud. Where *could* there be Romance between them? Were none of her girl-dreams to come true? *Was* it Love? She knew she was very, very fond of Keith, that there was not any sacrifice too great to make for such an affection. On the two occasions since he had gone

west, when his vacation had coincided with hers, she had been very, very glad to see him, very happy to be with him. And yet the feeling was so absurdly a part of her—like her love for Rose or Chrissy.

Two months before in Lucerne, she had received a letter from Keith in which he explained, with businesslike detail, that he had made a "strike" which assured him a good income, and that, immediately upon her return to Blossom, he would claim the old "promise." Even while the tiny, inner voice of rebellion protested that there had never been a real promise, April was telling herself that she had let Keith hope, and wait; that perhaps real love *was* matter-of-fact and everyday-like, like Keith's letter, like all his letters, and that, when she saw him, and he *told* her—it would be like her dreams!

But why had he not come to the station to meet her? Perhaps—her heart stirred—he had wanted to see her first, alone. He would not even ask her if she loved him—he would take it for granted, just as he had taken that absurd, childish promise for granted. And she must say yes.

A sudden step startled her, sent the blood pounding to her heart. Of course it was Keith—someone had sent him out on the Point. She looked wildly about for some way of escape. But a voice that was not Keith's hailed her.

"Ah, Miss April! I have to come out here to find you!"

"Michael Brown!" She sprang to her feet, her gladness in her eyes. "Oh, it's so *good* to see you. It's part of—coming home!"

He caught her outstretched hands and held them close. His eyes swept her slim, alert figure, rested on her face. She colored under the intentness of his scrutiny.

"Well, it's—me!" she laughed, pulling her hands away. "Are you—disappointed?"

"I was looking to see if there was anything left of the little April I found in my wardrobe!"

"Oh, there's a great deal of her left—ask Toto! Do you know, from the moment we started for home I have been consumed by a dread that all you Blossom people might find me different and—grown-up? Of course I've got to be grown-up, but I don't want to *seem* so. For awhile I want to be just happy at being back home and not to have to think of anything serious, like that I'm old now and must choose a career and all that. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully frivolous and not any good for big things!"

Michael Brown suddenly remembered something Leila Lightwood had said about April's gift of happiness. April went on, with pretty meekness: "What *is* there that an April-creature like me can do?"

Michael Brown held back the answer that leaped

to his tongue. Something of it, though, burned in his eyes. He leaned toward April, with an intensity that frightened her.

"Aprilly!" Miss Manny's name fell like a caress from his lips. "This old world is so puzzled and lost by so many paths, so many turnings, so many beliefs, so many preachers, that it's forogtten about just plain happiness and kindness! A few of us—blazing a trail of simple living with the real things in life—" he broke off, abruptly.

"*Michael!*" April's voice escaped from her, involuntarily. It was pleading. She was frightened. She wanted him to stop. But she wanted him, more, to go on.

"April, dear, I've waited six years —to ask you. I want you to be my wife. I want you to love me and share my work. What I have to offer may not seem much in your eyes and yet—I believe you will think it worth something. Oh, April, I love you!" His voice faltered, boyishly. "I must have always loved you! I've tried to make myself think that I was too old to ask you to love me. And for a long time I thought it would be Keith until, one day as I sat out here on the rocks, thinking about you, I spied this, down there on that ledge." He dropped Keith's little seal ring into her hand. "I told myself you must have thrown it away. I took it as a sign that I might dare to hope. April—look at me!" For April had turned her face away.

"*Don't*—" she cried, in a miserable, small voice "Don't say—another word, please! I can't—listen."

"April, haven't I a chance?"

April slowly shook her head. Michael Brown rose to his feet. "Then it *is* Keith. Well, dear, I'm not sorry I have told you—how I feel. Don't let it grieve you—or make any difference in our friendship. I want you to be happy—more than anything else." He turned abruptly and left her.

April moved, impulsively, as though to call him back. She did not *want* him to go away—like that. He loved her. He *loved* her! That beautiful, wonderful truth sent the blood pulsing through her body until it seemed as though her heart must burst. He must not go away until she had told him how proud she was to have his love! But she had let him think she loved Keith, that she was going to marry Keith. And Keith might be waiting, now, at the cottage to see her.

Keith was not there, but Chrissy was. April, unnerved and a little hysterical, was startled by her embarrassed, constrained manner.

"April, may I talk to you for just a few moments —alone?"

"Why, yes, Chrissy. We can sit out here under the trees. Toto's probably taking a bit of a wink, as he calls it. Poor dear, he is so tired of hotels and trains and boats. And Miss Manny's in the kitchen. What *is* it, Chris?"

April's forced composure did not help Chrissy with her errand. She flushed uncomfortably.

"It's about Keith. He didn't want me to say anything to you—he thought it looked as though he was afraid to, but I just made up my mind that *someone* ought to say something to prevent unhappiness all around. Mistakes can sometimes be headed off, you see." Chrissy tried to make her tone matter-of-fact. "Keith's worrying a lot over an understanding he says you and he have—"

"Oh, *Chrissy,*" interrupted April, her cheeks rose-red. "So *that's* why he didn't come to meet me! I can guess. He's fallen in love—*really* in love—and he's fretting over something he said to me once, years ago when we were just children—"

Chrissy regarded April with wide eyes. "And don't you care?"

April's voice trembled with something very like laughter. "Not a *bit*—dear old Keith. I love him tremendously, but just the way I love you and Rose. Oh, Chris, tell me, *is* it Rose?"

Chrissy was watching April closely. She had dreaded her disagreeable mission, self-imposed as it was. Could April be pretending this curious elation?

Yes, it's Rose. Isn't that funny, when they've known each other for so long? But Rose is just the girl for Keith, she's so steady she'll help him along immensely." Practical, world-wise Chrissy! "You're

sure you don't care a bit?" she finished, childishly.

"Oh, Chrissy—*care!*" April caught her friend and danced her about under the apple blossoms. "I'm the happiest creature on earth. Please don't think I'm crazy. Tell Rose and Keith that I adore them both and shower my blessings upon them. *Nothing* could be nicer. But, oh, Chrissy—" She fell back and regarded the other girl with wide, serious eyes. "Chrissy, we're all really, truly grown-up aren't we? And what a brick you are to do this just so that there wouldn't be a mistake. Hurry off, old dear!" She pushed the startled Chrissy down the path. And Chrissy was glad to go—she knew that April's excitement was only a cloak to hide a really stricken heart—any moment it might fail her!

But the "stricken heart" was beating madly in its great joy. April waited until Chrissy turned into the path to Forest Hill, then, with one fleeting look over her shoulder at the quiet cottage, she ran down the road toward the town.

The old garden of the Rectory lay wrapped in the tranquil glow of the spring twilight. April stole into it through the hedge. She paused for a moment in the grass-grown path. High above her in the feathery branches a robin sang. The sweetness of the note thrilled the girl, hesitating, before her Great Adventure. The long window of the study was open; she crept softly toward it—over its sill.

Michael Brown sat at his desk, his head dropped into his hand. His fingers were caressing the funny little wreath April had brought to him as a welcome token, years ago.

A rustling startled him. He lifted his head and saw April standing in the window, the twilight glow bright behind her. At her abashed smile, at the deep flush playing on her cheeks, his heart leaped. In her bravely steady glance he read surrender.

"April!" He sprang toward her, with outstretched arms. "April," he repeated softly, unbelieving.

She was all-Aprilly. "Michael—I've come—I've—it never *was* Keith! It—it *always* was you—I guess—I know. Michael, if you want—"

"If—oh, April!"

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